

# HODDER & STOUGHTON'S PEOPLE'S LIBRARY

General Editor: SIDNEY DARK.

H&S

PLANT LIFE	Grant Allen
HOW TO UNDERSTAND PHILOSOPHY	A. E. Baker
THAT BOOY OF YOURS	Dr. J. W. Barton
CARDINAL NEWMAN	Canon William Barry
THE EVERLASTING MAN	G. K. Chesterton
ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI	G. K. Chesterton
WHAT I SAW IN AMERICA	G. K. Chesterton
ST. TERESA	Mrs. Cecil Chesterton
THE GREATEST BOOK IN THE WORLD	T. H. Darlow
QUEEN ELIZABETH	Sidney Dark
THE RENAISSANCE	Sidney Dark
HOW TO ENJOY LIFE	Sidney Dark
HOW TO READ HISTORY	W. Wathin Davies
JESUS CHRIST	Canon Anthony C. Deane
HOW TO ENJOY THE BIBLE	Canon Anthony C. Deane
VICTORIAN POETRY	John Drinkwater
THE GREATEST THING IN THE WORLD, and Other Addresses	Henry Drummond
THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT	J. H. Fabre
THE LIFE OF THE FLY	J. H. Fabre
MEN OF LETTERS (Collected Essays, Vol. I)	Philip Guedalla
MEN OF AFFAIRS (Collected Essays, Vol. II)	Philip Guedalla
MEN OF WAR (Collected Essays, Vol. III)	Philip Guedalla
STILL LIFE (Collected Essays, Vol. IV)	Philip Guedalla
ADVENTURES IN FRIENDSHIP	David Grayson
FOLDED HANDS	Richard King
DR. JOHNSON AND HIS CIRCLE	Robert Lynd
COAL AND ITS STORY	E. A. Martin
THE MIDDLE AGES	E. B. Osborn
OUR DEBT TO GREECE AND ROME	E. B. Osborn
SOME THINGS THAT MATTER	Lord Riddell
HOW TO ENJOY THE OLD MASTERS	Frank Rutter
THE POETRY OF ARCHITECTURE	Frank Rutter
NERVES IN DISORDER	Dr. A. T. Schofield
A PEOPLE'S LIFE OF CHRIST	Archdeacon Paterson Smyth
THE GOSPEL OF THE HEREAFTER	Archdeacon Paterson Smyth
ATOMS AND ELECTRONS	J. W. N. Sullivan
EVERYDAY BIOLOGY	Professor J. Arthur Thomson
HOW TO ENJOY WILD FLOWERS	Marcus Woodward
HOW TO ENJOY THE COUNTRYSIDE	Marcus Woodward

HODDER & STOUGHTON

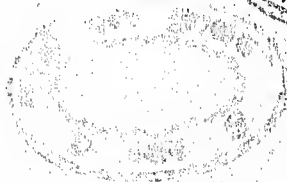
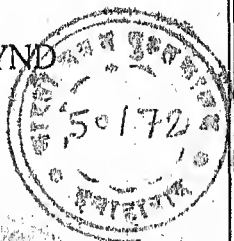
H&S

LIMITED, LONDON, E.C. 4

9201-423 ~~885~~/

# DR. JOHNSON AND COMPANY

BY  
ROBERT LYND

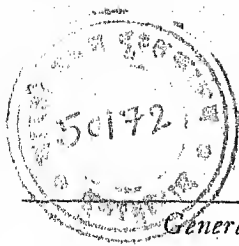


## H&S

HODDER AND STOUGHTON  
PUBLISHERS LONDON

TO THE MEMORY  
OF  
J. HUGH JONES

*Printed in Great Britain for Hodder and Stoughton, Limited,  
by Richard Clay & Sons, Limited, Bungay, Suffolk.*



---

## *General Preface*

---

THE object of HODDER AND STOUGHTON'S PEOPLE'S LIBRARY is to supply in brief form simply written introductions to the study of History, Literature, Biography and Science ; in some degree to satisfy that ever-increasing demand for knowledge which is one of the happiest characteristics of our time. The names of the authors of the first volumes of the Library are sufficient evidence of the fact that each subject will be dealt with authoritatively, while the authority will not be of the "dry-as-dust" order. Not only is it possible to have learning without tears, but it is also possible to make the acquiring of knowledge a thrilling and entertaining adventure. HODDER AND STOUGHTON'S PEOPLE'S LIBRARY will, it is hoped, supply this adventure.

---

## *Contents*

---

CHAP.	PAGE
I. DR. JOHNSON . . . . .	9
II. BOSWELL . . . . .	49
III. THE EARLIEST FRIENDS . . . . .	91
IV. A PRE-BOSWELL GROUP . . . . .	127
V. REYNOLDS, GOLDSMITH, BURKE, AND THE YEARS OF THE DICTATORSHIP . . . . .	165
VI. DR. JOHNSON AND WOMEN . . . . .	215

---

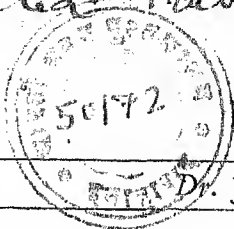
*Dr. Johnson*

---





9207 423  
Jagdish Prasad / B.A. class  
3rd



---

*Chapter I*

---

Dr. Johnson

DR. JOHNSON survives in literary history as the king—nay, the emperor—of good company: yet few men of genius have seemed less fitted in some respects for the pleasures of society. His appearance was such that the children of Sir John Hawkins used to call him Polypheme and Gilbert Cooper spoke of him as Caliban. The scrofula or king's evil which he is said to have caught from his nurse in childhood, and for which he was "touched" by Queen Anne, left him disfigured for life and with the use of only one eye. His figure, which, according to Boswell, approached the gigantic, was, in the years in which we know him best, "unwieldy from corpulency," and, whether he was in company or walking along the street, he added to the grotesque effect by startling, convulsive



gestures, like those of a man suffering from St. Vitus's dance. Even when he was a young man, his appearance had been found "very forbidding" by the woman who was to become his wife, and Pope, on making inquiries about the young author of "London," had Johnson described to him as "a sad spectacle."

Hogarth's account of his first glimpse of Johnson as a young man was even more uncomplimentary. One day, when he called to see Samuel Richardson, "he perceived a person standing at a window in the room, shaking his head and rolling himself about in a strange ridiculous manner. He concluded that he was an idiot, whom his relations had put under the care of Mr. Richardson as a very good man." The supposed idiot was Johnson.

A minor poet of the age wrote of him as unflatteringly :

To view him, porters with their loads would rest,  
And babes cling frighted to the nurse's breast.

The testimony to the unattractiveness of

Johnson at first sight, indeed, is overwhelming. Fanny Burney declared that he had "a face the most ugly, a person the most awkward, and manners the most singular that ever were or ever can be seen." Boswell, it is only fair to say, contended that Johnson's face, disfigured though it was, was "naturally of the cast of an ancient statue," and there is an early portrait by Reynolds which shows us Johnson, not as a magnificently ugly man, but as a man of almost handsome as well as noble countenance. But the general effect of contemporary descriptions is one of monstrous grotesqueness, such as Churchill conveys in his satirical lines :

Features so horrid, were it light,  
Would put the devil himself to flight.

And his habits were at times as eccentric and grotesque as his appearance. Boswell, in order to bring him to life, has spared us none of these oddities of behaviour, and he does not shrink from something like caricature in his account of Johnson's facial and

bodily contortions during conversation. "In the intervals of articulating," he says, "he made various sounds with his mouth, sometimes as if ruminating, or what is called chewing the cud, sometimes giving a half whistle, sometimes making his tongue play backward from the roof of his mouth, as if clucking like a hen, and sometimes protruding it against his upper gums in front as if pronouncing quickly under his breath, *too, too, too*; all this accompanied sometimes with a thoughtful look, but more frequently with a smile. Generally, when he had concluded a period, in the course of a dispute, by which time he was a good deal exhausted by violence and vociferation, he used to blow out his breath like a whale."

His feet, like his head, arms, and body, were in perpetual restless motion as he talked.

Nor did he sacrifice more to the graces when he left the drawing-room for the dinner-table. When he was at table,

Boswell tells us, "his looks seemed rivetted to his plate." As a rule, he would neither talk nor listen till he had "satisfied his appetite, which was so fierce, and indulged with such intenseness, that while in the act of eating, the veins of his forehead swelled, and generally a strong perspiration was visible." When he ate fish, he used his fingers instead of a knife and fork, because, as he explained, he was short-sighted and afraid of bones. At his food, indeed, he was not only Polyphemus, but, according to Boswell, a disgusting Polyphemus. And when he drank, it was in the same greedy fashion in which he ate. "When he did eat, it was voraciously; when he did drink wine, it was copiously. He could practise abstinence, but not temperance." It is scarcely to be wondered at that a fastidious peer, according to Sir Joshua Reynolds, could no more have been prevailed upon to dine at the same table with Johnson and Goldsmith than with two tigers.

Johnson had other peculiar habits that did not endear him to conventional hostesses. Mrs. Boswell was intelligibly glad to see the last of him when he was her guest in Scotland. One of the things of which she complained was his practice of "turning the candles with their heads downwards, when they did not burn bright enough, and letting the wax drop upon the carpet"—a practice which, as Boswell observes, "could not but be disagreeable to a lady." Boswell also complained of Johnson's inexplicable habit of opening windows in an age in which the passion for fresh air was still almost unknown, and said that his own feelings on the subject might be expressed in the language of the frogs in the fable, "This may be sport to you; but it is death to us." Even here, though modern opinion is on the side of Dr. Johnson, we have evidence that he was an unaccommodating and eccentric guest.

Nor did he make many concessions to the conventions in his dress. Miss Reynolds

declared that he dressed in such a way as to be likely to be mistaken for a beggarman. Bennet Langton, who went to see him expecting to meet a well-dressed and decorous philosopher, was shocked by the huge untidy apparition that came down the stairs "with a little dark wig which scarcely covered his head," and Boswell on his first visit was also distressed to find Johnson's rooms and his clothes "sufficiently uncouth." "His brown suit of clothes looked very rusty, he had on a little old shrivelled unpowdered wig, which was too small for his head; his shirt-neck and knees of his breeches were loose; his black worsted stockings ill drawn up; and he had a pair of unbuckled shoes by way of slippers." It is true that Johnson began to dress better after the Thrales had adopted him into their family, and we find him at the age of sixty-nine taking Boswell out to help him to choose a pair of silver buckles, "as those he had were too small." But in the reports of his friends he survives for

ever as a natural sloven, and he has left us an immortal confession of his slovenliness in that memorable defence of the sanity of Christopher Smart, in the course of which he said to Dr. Burney : " Another charge was, that he did not love clean linen ; and I have no passion for it."

And, if Johnson's uncouthness, untidiness, and eccentric habits seemed to unfit him to play the part of a social idol, he had other qualities that were no more likely to make him welcome either in the tavern or in the drawing-room. He was not only of a naturally gloomy disposition, but was often irritable, surly, and indifferent to the feelings of his friends and acquaintances. His gloom may either have been the result of his lifelong disease, or may have been inherited, as he thought, from his father. " I inherited," he told Boswell, " a vile melancholy from my father, which has made me mad all my life, at least not sober." All through his life he was haunted by the dread of insanity and the dread of

death, and, shortly before his death, he spoke to Langton of the story of his existence as "like all other histories, a narrative of misery."

He was once asked how it was that a man who, like him, was continually delighting other people with lively and brilliant conversation, could call himself miserable. "Alas!" he replied, "it is all outside; I may be cracking my joke, and cursing the sun. *Sun, how I hate thy beams!*"

Johnson's irascibility and surliness may probably be attributed to the same cause as his melancholy, but they must have been none the less disconcerting to those of his contemporaries who suffered from them. There is universal agreement that Johnson was a bear, though there is also all but universal acquiescence in Goldsmith's modification of the description: "Johnson, to be sure, has a roughness in his manner; but no man alive has a more tender heart. He has nothing of the bear but his skin." Not every one, however,



was so charitable. Boswell's father, Lord Auchinleck, roundly spoke of Johnson as "a brute" and nicknamed him Ursa Major. Even Signor Baretti, for whom Johnson did so much, said, on hearing Lord Eglintoune express the wish that Johnson had been brought up in greater refinement and had lived in more polished society: "No, no, my lord, do with him what you would, he would always have been a bear"—a judgment which Lord Eglintoune mitigated only by saying: "True, but he would have been a dancing bear." Miss Reynolds declared, in a fine Johnsonian phrase, that Johnson was never "intentionally asperous," but even in doing so, admitted that he "inverted the common forms of civilised society." Burke, who, according to Boswell, had "received some pretty severe strokes from Dr. Johnson," on hearing some of Johnson's sallies described as the rebuke of the righteous, which are like excellent oil, exclaimed caustically: "Oil of vitriol!"

It is improbable, indeed, that Dr. Johnson ever had a friend whom he did not at times assault or snub in an outrageous fashion. Mrs. Thrale, goddess though he called her, suffered like the rest, and she has left us an account, not only of his attacks on herself, but of his ill-mannered request to Hannah More, who had been paying him compliments, to "consider what her flattery was worth, before she choked him with it." Boswell, to be sure, gives a milder version of the anecdote, but he himself has painted an equally vivid portrait of Johnson as a master of rudeness and rebuff. Even during his first interview with Johnson in the parlour of Davies's bookshop, he was the victim of two embarrassing retorts, neither of which had much point except its "asperousness." At the beginning of the interview he admitted nervously to Johnson that he came from Scotland, saying in extenuation: "I do indeed come from Scotland, but indeed I cannot help it." "That, Sir, I find," said

Johnson with fierce jocularly, "is what a great many of your countrymen cannot help." It was an unpropitious beginning for one of the great friendships of history, but worse was to follow. Upon Johnson's beginning to complain of Garrick and of his failure to send him a pass for a new play, Boswell, eager to please, interrupted with: "Oh, sir, I cannot think Mr. Garrick would grudge such a trifle to *you*." "Sir," declared Johnson sternly, "I have known David Garrick longer than you have done; and I know no right you have to talk to me on the subject." That, in an ordinary man, would be called bad manners, and it is impossible to deny that Dr. Johnson's manners were occasionally abominable. Boswell himself was once in such a condition of spiritual confusion as the result of the rudeness of Johnson's attacks on him that, in his own words, "I was so much hurt, and had my pride so much roused, that I kept away from him for a week."

We get the same impression of reckless irascibility in a passage in the "Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides." "I regretted," says Boswell, after describing a ridiculous argument between Johnson and an old Presbyterian minister, "that Dr. Johnson did not practise the art of accommodating himself to different sorts of people. Had he been softer with this venerable old man, we might have had more conversation; but his forcible spirit, and impetuosity of manner, may be said to spare neither sex nor age. I have seen," he adds, "even Mrs. Thrale stunned." Johnson himself was conscious of his rudeness of manner, but boldly defended it when his friends took him to task for it. "What harm," he demanded, mentioning a complaint of Langton's on the subject to Boswell, "does it do any man to be contradicted?" "I suppose," suggested Boswell bravely, "he meant the *manner* of doing it; roughly—and harshly." "And who," said Johnson, "is the worse for that?" "It hurts

people of weak nerves," explained Boswell. "I know no such weak-nerved people," declared Johnson contemptuously. Not long afterwards, Boswell, eternally inquisitive, raised the matter again, and faced Johnson with the question "whether he thought that the roughness of his manner had been an advantage or not, and if he would not have done more good if he had been more gentle." "No, sir," replied Johnson emphatically—it was in the year in which he died—"I have done more good as I am. Obscenity and impiety have always been repressed in my company." There is no other example, I think, of a virtuous bully's having become the idol of the club, the tavern, and the drawing-room—the perfect companion at once of the profligate, the toper, the scholar, and the fashionable lady.

I have begun with a catalogue of the defects of Johnson as a social being, because it is only when we realise how unfitted he was in many respects for society that we

can understand how prodigious is the position that he occupies in the affections of men and women to-day. Poor, repulsively ugly, uncouth, with disgusting table-manners, surly, irascible, a bully, intolerant, dirty, slovenly and ridiculous in dress, eccentric, unhealthy, morbid and gloomy, haunted by a bad conscience, tormented by the fear of insanity and death—one would say it was the portrait of a sour misanthropist, doomed to avoid and to be avoided by his fellow-men. Johnson, on the other hand, had scarcely a defect that was not more than counterbalanced by a corresponding virtue. Even those who, on first meeting him, found him awkward and repellent were usually convinced before they parted from him that he was the most enchanting companion alive. His churlishness was exceeded by his charity. He was dictatorial, but, equally, he loved to give pleasure. Though he may have flouted the graces, no man set a higher value on them. He was as courteous as he

was ill-mannered. He was not more gloomy than he was playful. His very morbidity of mind, instead of making him shrink from company, drove him into company as the only refuge from his haunting fears.

I doubt if any other man of genius ever lived to whom company was so necessary as it was to Dr. Johnson. "Solitude to him," says Sir Joshua Reynolds, "was horror; nor would he ever trust himself alone but when employed in writing or reading. He has often begged me to go home with him to prevent his being alone in the coach. Any company was better than none."

Hence the extraordinary variety of the company in his biography. He could associate without envy with other men of genius, and at the same time was equally at home (in Reynolds's phrase) with "many mean persons whose presence he could command." It might be said of him that it was only in company and in conversation that he was a man with ten talents making

full use of them all. Left alone with a pen in his study, he had command of no more than half his talents; but let a visitor call, and there was all but as great a difference as between Achilles sulking in his tent and the Achilles of battle.

He was a man who found his true vocation, not in his work, but in his leisure. He was most active when he was most slothful, and never wasted his time less than when he was wasting his time. Conversation has often been recognised as an art, but never as a profession, and, because it is not one of the activities by which men customarily earn a livelihood, Johnson constantly reproached himself with indolence. When we reflect on the matter, however, there seems to be some flaw in the code of morality which would commend the literary industry of Trollope and would condemn the conversational industry of Johnson. The world has not gained less from this than from that, and, if we judge by results, it is difficult to agree with



Johnson's denunciation of himself as an idler.

He was certainly no idler as a student of the art of conversation. He practised talking as assiduously as Stevenson practised writing. He told Reynolds that he had "a rule, which he said he always practised on every occasion, of speaking his best, whether the person to whom he addressed himself was or was not capable of comprehending him." His genius as a conversationalist was not the fruit of indolence, but was, as much as any other kind of genius, due to an infinite capacity for taking pains. He had a mind which, as Reynolds said, was "always ready for use," and the most variously stored mind of his age. While not conventionally studious, he was a supremely great student of life, manners and literature. And all that he had learned, though he could not put it on paper, he could produce at a moment's notice in a tavern or over a cup of tea. Tom Tyers said of him that he

had "the most knowledge in ready cash" of any man that he had ever met.

Even this, however, would not have made him a great conversationalist if he had not persistently remembered that conversation is a dramatic business in which Hamlet is not a mere declaimer of monologues, but must learn to take his cue even from a gravedigger. Johnson was a man who listened eagerly to the gravedigger. He was a listener of genius as well as a talker of genius. Hawkins said of him that he observed Swift's rule "of giving every man time to take his share of the conversation," and that, in general conversation, "no man threw back the ball with greater ease and pleasantry." "He encouraged others, particularly young men, to speak," we are told on the same authority, "and paid a due attention to what they said." "No man," said Johnson himself, in a memorable attempt to prove that he was "well-bred to a needless degree of scrupulosity," "is so cautious not to inter-

rupt another; no man thinks it so necessary to appear attentive when others are speaking; no man so steadily refuses preference to himself, or so willingly bestows it on another, as I do."

Those who are accustomed to think of Johnson as always talking for victory, and, if necessary, stunning his antagonist into submission, will paint a misleading portrait of him if they do not also remember that, while he was a dictator, he was a dictator boundlessly interested in the interests of other people. Tyers said of him that he had Locke's art of "leading people to talk on their favourite subjects, and on what they knew best." The universality of his readiness in conversation is commemorated in the story of a country clergyman who complained to Mrs. Thrale's mother of the dulness of rural society. "They talk of runts"—(young cows)—he said bitterly of his parishioners. "Sir," Mrs. Thrale's mother reproved him with noble wisdom, "Mr. Johnson would learn to talk of

runts." Johnsonian literature is rich in examples of Johnson's talk on runts. We find him on one occasion discussing the digestive faculties of dogs with a country rector. He met a dancing-master at Mrs. Thrale's and, having in early life had a few lessons in dancing, proceeded to discuss the subject in such a fashion as convinced the dancing-master that Johnson knew more about it than himself. Other subjects on which we find him conversing are the management of a farm, thatching, the process of malting, the manufacture of gunpowder, the process of tanning, the operation of minting money, "the nature of milk, and the various operations upon it, and making whey, &c.," and, according to George Steevens, Arkwright "pronounced him to be the only person who, on a first view, understood both the principle and powers of his most complicated piece of machinery."

These are not subjects that seem to lend themselves to great conversation, but the

list is at least evidence of Johnson's magnificent readiness to throw himself into the interests of other people. He was a man who would have enjoyed discussing the manufacture of spectacles with a spectacle-maker, law with a lawyer, pigs with a pig-breeder, diseases with a doctor, or ships with a shipbuilder. He knew that in conversation it is only more blessed to give than to receive.

Not that, in drawing other men out on their pet subjects, he was being deliberately courteous. His chief motive, we may be sure, was his insatiable curiosity. Few men have been so curious about so many things as Dr. Johnson. He could immerse himself in chemical experiments as in the problems of philosophy. He had an experimental curiosity, indeed, that led him, at the age of seventy, to shave the hair from part of his right arm and breast merely in order to see how long it would take to grow again, and, four years later, to cut forty-one leaves from his vine in Bolt

Court and to weigh and dry them on his book-case in order to see "what weight they will lose by drying." He had a range of curiosity that extended from hair and vine-leaves to the great problems of metaphysics, and was impatient of few subjects except the Punic War and Cataline's conspiracy. Even these things, I fancy, he would have tolerated had he lived in another age, but the eighteenth century was fond, to the point of canting, of drawing precedents from the history of the ancient world. Hence Johnson's contemptuous description of the conversation of Charles James Fox. "He talked to me at club one day," he told Mrs. Thrale, "concerning Cataline's conspiracy—so I withdrew my attention and talked about Tom Thumb." Arthur Murphy, however, explained Johnson's objection to history on more general grounds. "General history," he says, "had little of his regard. Biography was his delight. The proper study of mankind is man. Sooner than

c

hear of the Punic War, he would be rude to the person that introduced the subject." Most people will agree that, for the general purposes of conversation, there is no need to drag in the Punic War. They prefer, like Johnson, conversation that comes home more naturally to men's business and bosoms. That is obviously the conversation he had in mind when he declared that talk about the Punic War "was lost time and carried one away from common life."

It was Johnson's passion for common life that made him, though in many respects a man of unyielding temperament, so eager to share in pleasures unsuitable alike to his figure and to his character. He loved books, but he loved the life men lived more. When he was in the country with the Thrales, such was his love of doing what everybody else was doing that he even insisted upon following the hounds, sometimes riding fifty miles on end. He was, Mrs. Thrale declares, "proud to be among the sportsmen; and I think no

praise ever went so close to his heart as when Mr. Hamilton called out one day upon Brighthelmstone Downs, 'Why, Johnson rides as well, for aught I see, as the most illiterate fellow in England.' " Boswell tells us that he boasted that "he rode faster at a fox-chase than anybody"; and, though Johnson spoke ill of hunting—"It is very strange, and very melancholy," he said, "that the paucity of human pleasures should persuade us ever to call hunting one of them"—he found a childish enjoyment in enjoying the enjoyments of other people. It may have been this that persuaded him, who had never seen the sea till he was fifty-six years old, and who probably had not swum since he was at Oxford, to bathe at Brighton in the year 1766, when the man who dipped people, on seeing him swim, said to him, "Why, sir, you must have been a stout-hearted gentleman forty years ago!" "I hate immersion," he said to Mr. Wickins, the Lichfield draper, who was expatiating



on the salubrity of the cold bath, but Johnson would do socially for gaiety what he would not do egotistically for his health.

Johnson may not have been a sportsman, but, undoubtedly, in company, he was a sportive man. He seems always to have possessed that sportive spirit, for instance, that finds it difficult to resist a challenge. "I ran a race in the rain this day," he wrote boastfully to Robert Levett from Paris, at the age of sixty-six, "and beat Baretti." Miss Reynolds tells of another occasion when, while staying at a country house in Devonshire, he replied to a young lady who boasted that she could run better than anybody: "Madam, you cannot outrun me." They at once went out on to the lawn, and set off. "The lady," says Miss Reynolds, "at first had the advantage; but Dr. Johnson happening to have slippers on much too small for his feet, kicked them off up into the air, and ran a great length without them, leaving the lady far behind him, and, having won the victory, he returned, leading her by

the hand, with looks of high exultation and delight."

In his amusements, we picture him as one who was physically a monster, morally a sage, and spiritually a child. There is a childish element both in his emulation and in his boastfulness. He could not walk through Gunnersbury Park and hear one of the company declaring that he could have climbed some gigantic tree when he was a boy without immediately proclaiming, "Why, I can swarm it now," and setting off to do it. He again and again startled his worshippers in his old age by climbing gates and performing other feats of agility which proved that, though no longer a boy, he was an old boy. When he visited Lichfield three years before his death, he went to a field in search of a rail over which he used to jump when he was a child, "and," said he afterwards in a transport of joy, "I have been so fortunate as to find it." "I stood," said he, "gazing upon it some time with a degree of rapture, for it brought to my mind all my juvenile

sports and pastimes, and at length I determined to try my skill and dexterity; I laid aside my hat and wig, pulled off my coat, and leapt over it twice." Here we see Johnson's low spirits matched with and defeated by his high spirits, and this eternal opposition in his nature is one of the things that have endeared him to generations of readers.

We have another instance of the same childish sportiveness in the story that Bennet Langton told Best when they were standing together at the top of a "very steep hill" in Lincolnshire. "Poor dear Dr. Johnson," said Langton, "when he came to this spot, turned to look down the hill, and said he was determined to 'take a roll down.' When we understood what he meant to do, we endeavoured to dissuade him; but he was resolute, saying he had not had a roll for a long time; and, taking out of his lesser pockets whatever might be in them—keys, pencil, purse, a pen-knife—and laying himself parallel with the edge of the hill, he actually

descended, turning himself over and over till he came to the bottom." Best speaks of this outbreak of childish high spirits as "this extraordinary freak of the great lexicographer," but it was a freak characteristic of the contradictory Dr. Johnson. The truth is, in his writings Johnson was obedient to a formula, but in his life and conversation he was always doing or saying some unexpected thing that, if it did not completely break the formula, expanded it and gave it variety.

He himself would probably have been astonished, and possibly perturbed, if he had foreseen that, as a result of his genius for the unexpected in word and deed, he would take his place in later generations among the great comic figures of literature. But that is what has happened to him. Falstaff himself is not the occasion of a more inexhaustible flow of laughter than Dr. Johnson. It was Jack Point's bitter complaint that "an accepted wit has but to say, 'Pass the mustard,' and they roar their ribs out;" Dr. Johnson is now an

accepted wit on that level. Men laugh not merely when he says such admirable things as: "Whoever thinks of going to bed before twelve o'clock is a scoundrel," but almost whenever he uses an abusive epithet. His very ill manners have become comic with time, and his ugliness pleases us like a glorious caricature. We no longer approach him with awe, as so many of his contemporaries did. He cannot bludgeon us from the pages of a book and we can laugh without fear of his terrifying frown.

It would, of course, be absurd to suggest that his contemporaries saw in him only the dictator, the master moralist, and the great lexicographer. Mingled with their veneration for his writings and his character was the realisation that he was a giant of comedy. "Dr. Johnson," said Fanny Burney in her diary, "has more fun, and comical humour, and love of nonsense about him than almost anybody I ever saw." Garrick said of him to Boswell: "Rabelais, and all other wits, are nothing compared to him. . . . John-

son gives you a forcible hug and shakes laughter out of you whether you will or no." Hawkins declared that "in the talent of humour there was hardly ever his equal except perhaps among the old comedians, such as Tarleton and a few others mentioned by Cibber." Boswell, Mrs. Thrale, and Hannah More have all testified to the same thing. "You would have imagined," said Hannah More, describing a tea-party at Sir Joshua's at which Johnson was present, "we had been at some comedy had you heard our peals of laughter," and she observed that "the old genius was extremely jocular." It was in search of materials for a portrait of this extremely jocular genius that Boswell went to Fanny Burney. "Grave Sam, and great Sam, and solemn Sam—all these," he said, "he has appeared over and over again. I want to show him as gay Sam, agreeable Sam, pleasant Sam."

At the same time, his most admiring contemporaries laughed for the most part only with Johnson, while his posthumous

admirers laugh both with him and at him. To them he was occasionally jocular: to us he is again and again not only jocular, but a joke. This is not to say that we have ceased to reverence him, but that we are no longer laughter-tied as we approach him. "His eyes," said Mrs. Thrale, "though of a light grey colour, were so wild, so piercing, and at times so fierce, that fear was, I believe, the first emotion in the hearts of all his beholders." Those fierce grey eyes strike no fear in us to-day.

While we laugh both with and at Dr. Johnson, however—laugh at him when he says a magnificently wrong-headed thing in all seriousness, as well as with him when he bludgeons Boswell or Mrs. Thrale with his wit—we always laugh with affection and admiration. He is almost unique as a comic character: no other comic character is at once so loved for his good heart and so admired for his good sense. Other comic characters are most amusing in their misadventures: Johnson is amusing in his triumphs. There has never elsewhere been

so great and magnanimous a man in whose life there was such a current vein of comedy. It would be easy, I agree, to exaggerate the comic element in the life of Dr. Johnson. Just as critics argue as to whether "The Cherry Orchard" is a tragedy or a comedy, though Tchekhov himself meant it to be played as a comedy, it would be possible to find good arguments for portraying Dr. Johnson either as mainly a tragic or as mainly a comic figure. But there would be no real contradiction between the two sets of arguments. Johnson is in the best sense of the word all the more comic a figure because he is so tragic a figure. When we laugh with him, it is in full consciousness of a background of suffering and despair. It is because he engages our sympathies at more points than any other man of genius that we find never-ending enjoyment in his hilarious company. He is the perfect boon-companion among all the population of books. In him goodness became convivial, and grandeur of soul took its ease in the tavern. In his



conversation, virtue holds a carnival, and wisdom is at once sociable and riotous. If we knew him only from his writings and the records of his good deeds, we should not have known more than half of Johnson and we should not have loved him half as well. It would not have been enough for him to be a great and good man if he had not also been a consummate entertainer. He is the hero of the most permanently entertaining book in English literature.

People sometimes talk nowadays as though Johnson the entertainer were largely a creation of Boswell's, and as though, while his contemporaries revered the great writer and the great man, it was not till after his death that men came to see that his supreme genius was the genius of conversation. This is a mistaken view. There has been no such catastrophic change in the general estimate of Dr. Johnson. There is abundant evidence that many of his closest friends regarded his conversation as greater than his books, just as we do.

Reynolds declared that Johnson's conversation "not only supported his character as an author, but in the opinion of many was superior." That Burke was one of the many is clear from his declaration that "Boswell's 'Life' was a greater monument to Johnson's fame than all his writings put together." Others claimed at least equality for his conversation and his writings, and we find Mr. Crisp, Fanny Burney's adopted father, writing to her, after she had sent him a letter describing Johnson's conversation: "It half reconciles me to his heavy Dictionary. I am now convinced (putting together your account of him and what I had heard before) that his real *forte* is Conversation." And Mr. Crisp anticipated the judgment of posterity when he added: "His quickness, his originality, his oddity, his singularity (which so well become him, and perhaps would nobody else) must make him a model of an entertaining companion." It must be remembered that the Johnson whom we know best—the Johnson of those last twenty years from which

the first-hand accounts of Boswell, Mrs. Thrale, and Fanny Burney are drawn—was a Johnson who had almost ceased to write and who did little else but talk. The poems, “The Rambler,” “The Dictionary,” “The Idler,” and “Rasselas” were all behind him, and the “Journey to the Western Isles” and the “Lives of the Poets” alone remained to be written. “His life,” said Mrs. Thrale, “at least since my acquaintance with him, consisted in little else than talking, when he was not absolutely employed in some serious piece of work, and whatever work he did seemed so much below his powers of performance that he appeared the idlest of all human beings.” The truth is, Dr. Johnson built up his fame with his writings, and put a tower on his fame with his conversation.

It is as an Iliad of conversation that the world enjoys his biography to-day. Johnson was a warrior of talk—we might almost describe him as a prize-fighter of talk—and, as we listen to him talking, we have as much sense of action as if we were

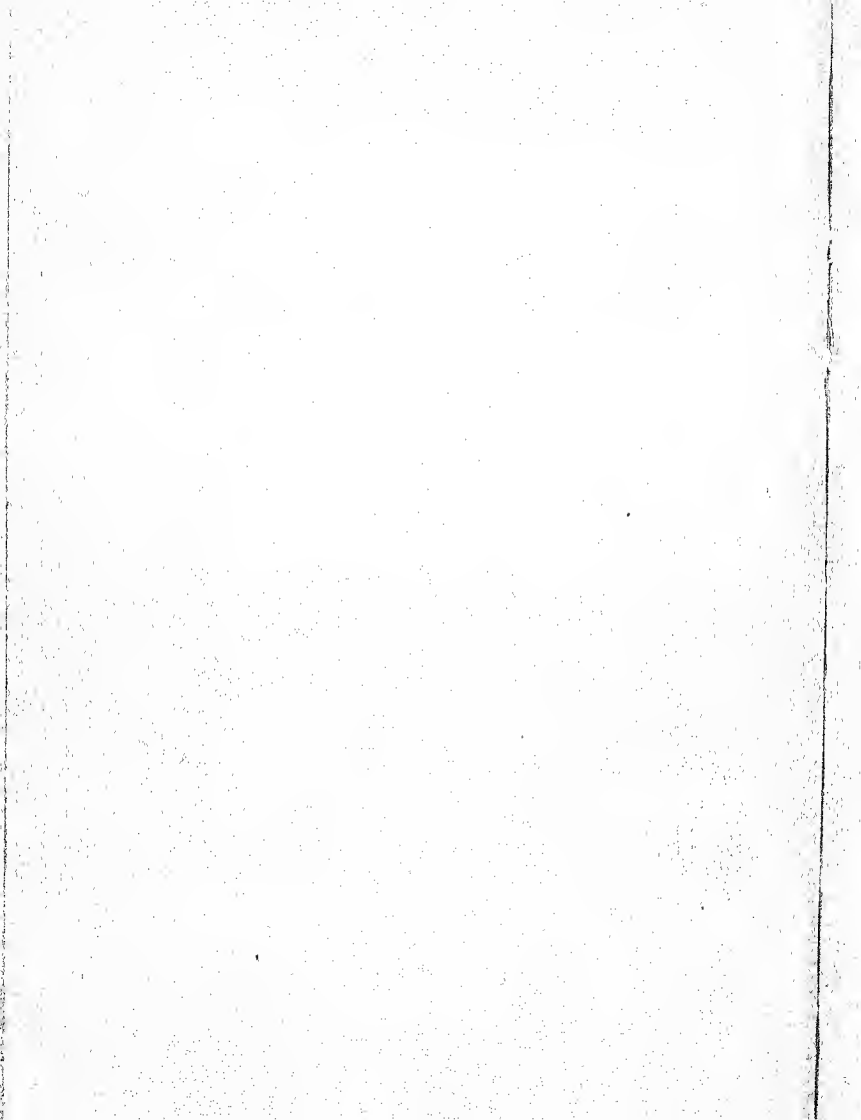
watching an engagement or the rounds of a contest. Boswell is not the only one of his biographers who observed that Johnson "sometimes talked for victory." "The most light and airy dispute," says Sir Joshua Reynolds, "was with him a dispute in the arena. He fought on every occasion as if his whole reputation depended upon the victory of the minute, and he fought with all the weapons. If he was foiled in argument he had recourse to abuse and rudeness." Reynolds condemns Johnson for this, and declares that he would have lost the affection of his friends if he had talked in "tête-à-tête conversations" as pugnaciously as he did on more public occasions. Reynolds was a mild man, however, and what offended him is sport to us. We love, not only the virtuous, the charitable, the polite Johnson, but the battling Johnson who, after a lively night at the Crown and Anchor, said to Boswell, "Well, we had good talk," and to whom Boswell flatteringly replied, "Yes, sir; you tossed and gored several persons."

To say this is not to pretend that Dr. Johnson is a good model for conversationalists. If he had been malicious or a misanthropist, his tossings and gorings would never have endeared him to us. Johnson is, perhaps, the only talker who "talked for victory" who has ever achieved the highest genius in conversation. Who, with a less gracious character than Johnson, would not have been utterly damned by Goldsmith's sentence: "There is no arguing with Johnson; for, when his pistol misses fire, he knocks you down with the butt end of it"? We love Johnson, however, because we begin with the knowledge that he is a great and good man, and, regarding his violence as for the most part the violence of sport, are no more perturbed by the fury of his blows than if we were watching Dempsey in the ring. His eternal comedy is the comedy of the sage putting on the gloves. In this fashion he, more than any other Englishman who ever lived, raised a life of talk to the level of a life of action.

---

*Boswell*

---



"BETWEEN ourselves," wrote Boswell to his friend Temple, complaining that Johnson, having published a book on the Hebrides, did not wish him to publish another on the same theme—"between ourselves, he is not apt to encourage one to *share* reputation with himself." If this is a true account of Johnson, how miserable his ghost must be if it ever revisits the earth, for no man of letters has ever "shared reputation" with another to a greater extent than he with Boswell! They are as inseparable in our imaginations as Castor and Pollux. Each, lacking the other, would lack half himself.

This is not to deny that they were both men of extraordinary original genius. It used to be imagined that Boswell was



merely a lucky fool who owed everything to his having attached himself as a parasite to Johnson. More recently, however, we have come to see that Boswell was a man of genius who would have interested the world, though not perhaps so greatly, even if he had never met Johnson. If he had not written a great book on Johnson, he would have written a great book on somebody else—possibly on himself. For, while Johnson and Paoli were Boswell's heroes, Boswell was also Boswell's hero. He may be said to have been divided into two persons, one of whom was never tired of gazing at the other and taking down notes of his doings and experiences. At the age of twenty-one he published anonymously "An Ode to Tragedy," and dedicated it to "James Boswell, Esq.," as to an admired friend, and we may be sure there was no one whom he loved better.

Luckily, even when he makes himself his hero, his genius remains predominantly comic. When, as president of the Soaping

Club at Edinburgh in his youth, he writes some verses about himself, affirming that

In short, to declare the plain truth,  
There is no better fellow alive,

he is candid enough to portray himself not only as a good fellow, but as a ridiculous fellow :

Boswell is pleasant and gay,  
For frolic by nature designed;  
He heedlessly rattles away  
When the company is to his mind.

" This maxim," he says, " you may see;  
We ne'er can have corn without chaff ";  
So not a bent sixpence cares he  
Whether *with* him or *at* him you laugh.

Even when he describes his personal appearance, as he does in " The Cub at New-market " (a poetical account of himself among members of the Jockey Club, written during his first visit to London and the south), he sees himself, not in the mirror of self-flattery, but in the mirror of caricature : " Plumpness," he writes, describing the " cub," who was himself—

Plumpness shone in his countenance;  
And Belly prominent declared  
That he for Beef and Pudding cared;  
He had a large and prom'nent head,  
That seemed to be composed of lead.

And, in dedicating this poem to the Duke of York, he writes: "Permit me to let the world know that the same cub has been laughed at by the Duke of York." Boswell from the first did not mind if he cut a ridiculous figure so long as he cut a figure.

All through his letters to his old college friend, the Rev. William Temple—letters far more intimate than any he ever wrote to Johnson—we can see him watching himself like a spectator in a theatre, and inviting Temple to be his fellow-spectator. It is, to change the image slightly, as though he were the showman of himself, saying: "Now see Boswell drunk. Now see him repentant. Now see him in love. Now see him disgracing himself with some 'infamous creature.' Now see him in the best society in the world." He cannot conceive that any one else can be less

interested in him than he is in himself. And, indeed, he is right. He is the rare kind of egotist that seldom bores us. He is an egotist who is in love, not only with himself, but with other people.

Nor is this the only respect in which he is a bundle of contradictions and, because of this, a continuous and fascinating puzzle. He is at once a man who yields to every temptation and a staunch friend of religion and morality. He is addicted to the most eloquent repentance and at the same time to explanations that the sins of which he repents were not, after all, very serious. He chuckles amid his pious groans. He is like a man married both to vice and to virtue and enjoying playing the one off against the other. While he is infatuated with a new mistress in Edinburgh, he gets drunk and, while drunk, is faithless to her. He hastens to his mistress to confess, to beg forgiveness, and to palliate his frailty. "I gloried," he reports to Temple ingenuously, "that I had ever been firmly constant

to her while I was myself." Boswell, however, finds it so difficult to remain faithful to any one woman that he writes to Temple advocating concubinage and asking: "If it was *morally* wrong, why was it permitted to the most pious men under the Old Testament?" It was in the same easy-going mood that he defended his drunkenness to Mrs. Stuart on the ground that "intoxication might happen at a time to any man." "Yes," she replied, "to any man but a Scotsman, for what with another man is an accident, is in him a habit." On another occasion, however, we find the genial defender of the vices going to St. Paul's and making a vow to abstain for six months from licentious connections, and again giving General Paoli his word of honour that he will abstain from fermented liquor for a year. There was not, indeed, in all Great Britain a more ardent friend of religion and good conduct than this mercurial reprobate. It was he who wrote, when Hume died: "It

has shocked me to think of his persisting in infidelity. . . . I am of Dr. Johnson's opinion, that those who write against religion ought not to be treated with gentleness."

Yet, with all the discrepancies between his conduct and his professions, and with all the fluctuations of his heart, his appetites, and his opinions, Boswell was no hypocrite. It was in perfect sincerity that, when going to Utrecht to study law, he wrote to a friend: "My great object is to attain a proper conduct in life. How sad it will be if I turn no better than I am! . . . I must, however, own to you that I have at bottom a melancholy cast; which dissipation relieves by making me thoughtless, and therefore an easier, though a more contemptible, animal." The truth is, Boswell was not only a man who, as he confessed, "talked at random," but a man whose destiny it was to live at random, and who found all the excitements of experience equally irresistible. But he

never pretended to be other than he was. He was naturally too candid to be able to play the hypocrite and to conceal his shortcomings, even if he had wished to do so. Hence, when he fell in love with Miss Blair and, wishing to marry her, sent Temple as a kind of ambassador to her, he wrote out a series of instructions to be followed during the visit, bidding his friend hint the worst as well as the best. "Praise me," he wrote, "for my good qualities—you know them; but tell also how odd, how inconstant, how impetuous, how much accustomed to women of intrigue. Ask gravely, 'Pray don't you imagine there is something of madness in that family!'" Was ever woman in such manner wooed? Yet the instructions are characteristic of Boswell in his readiness to appear at a disadvantage, whether from the love of showing himself as he really was or from the love of being a figure in an interesting situation.

Boswell's candour and his dramatic sense always, fortunately for us, went hand in

hand. He saw himself perpetually as a man in a dramatic situation, and he had perpetually to find a confidant to whom he could describe the latest situation in which he found himself. He could not even ask Miss Blair if she loved him without instantly scribbling to Temple an account of the interview in dialogue form, not even omitting his squeeze of her "firm hand" or her remark: "I wish I liked you as well as I do Auchinleck" (his father's estate). Similarly, when he was in love with Zélide of Utrecht, he felt that the situation was so interesting that he sent her letters to Rousseau, whom he scarcely knew, with the remark: "If you care to amuse yourself by reading some pieces by this young lady, you will find them in a small separate parcel. I should like to have your sentiments on her character." Boswell, in all his amusing love-affairs, was not only a man who kissed and told, but a man to whom telling gave a deeper and more lasting pleasure than kissing.

And his friendships with great men had



the same dramatic quality as his love-affairs. He was not one of those hero-worshippers who obliterate themselves and prostrate themselves before greatness. He was as susceptible to genius as to a pretty face, but in his meetings with genius he was always as conscious of the presence of James Boswell as of that of the man of genius in the scene. Both in love and in acquaintanceship, he continually paused to call attention to the fact that he, James Boswell, was, if not the chief actor, at least an actor worth some attention. When, as a young man of twenty-four, he wrote to Rousseau, requesting an interview, he introduced himself as "a man of singular merit," adding: "Although but a young man, I have had a variety of experiences, with which you will be impressed." "Open your door, then, sir," he wrote, "to a man who dares to say that he deserves to enter there. Trust a unique foreigner. You will never repent it." He thrust his company with as little appearance of ordinary

sensitiveness on Voltaire, on Wilkes, and on Horace Walpole. "He forced himself upon me," wrote Walpole to Gray, "in spite of my teeth and my doors," and in that phrase we have a measure of the impudence and persistence of Boswell.

It would be absurd, none the less, to describe Boswell, in his approaches to the great, as a "climber," for "climber" is a word used of men who climb from one rank of society into another, and Boswell, as a descendant of Robert Bruce and a son of Lord Auchinleck, had no feeling of social inferiority in his intercourse with the great. He was undoubtedly pushful, but the men into whose presence he forced himself with the greatest sense of triumph were not men of rank or wealth, but men of genius. When he was a youth of twenty, he besought Temple to "consider my situation," and he described it as that of a young fellow in love with the delights of London—"getting into the Guards, being about Court, enjoying the happiness of the

*beau monde*, and the company of men of Genius." And, if one may judge by his writings, he found the company of men of genius the supreme delight of them all. It is characteristic of him that, as Professor Tinker observes, while he met and conversed with King George III, he has left us no dialogues to record his talk with the King to set beside the dialogues that record his talk with Dr. Johnson.

When he first met Johnson at Tom Davies's house, he was a young man of twenty-two, while Johnson was fifty-three. Their first meeting, with Johnson's two overwhelming snubs, has been described in the previous chapter. It was an introduction, most people would have thought, of two incompatibles in age, temperament, nationality, and almost everything else. They had humour, sociability, and orthodoxy in common, however, and Johnson had a passion for making acquaintances. "Sir," he confided to Boswell at one of their early meetings, "I love the acquaintance

of young people; because, in the first place, I don't like to think of myself growing old. In the next place, young acquaintances must last longest, if they do last; and then, Sir, young men have more virtue than old men; they have more generous sentiments in every respect." Boswell does not tell us what he replied to this tribute to the virtue of the younger generation. But, in a whirl of excitement over his new friendship, he wrote off to Sir David Dalrymple with modest exultation: "You will smile to think of the association of so enormous a genius with one so slender." In the same month he wrote to Temple, telling how he had supped tête-à-tête with Johnson till between two and three. "He took me by the hand cordially and said: 'My dear Boswell, I love you very much.' Now, Temple, can I help indulging vanity?" The meetings between Johnson and Boswell after this have been recorded with such vividness that we are tempted to think of the two

men at times as inseparable cronies who till the death of Johnson were parted from each other only by accident and for short periods. It is difficult to realise that the months in which they did not see each other were far more numerous than the months in which they were together. Their friendship, if we date its beginning in May, 1763, when they first met, lasted more than twenty-one years, yet, according to the estimate of Dr. Birkbeck Hill, all the periods of time during which they were living near each other, if added together, would amount only to about two years, and on most days in those two years they probably did not see each other. Croker estimated that Boswell and Johnson spent two hundred and seventy-six days together in all, and that Boswell met Johnson only one hundred and eighty times during his twelve visits to England in the period of their friendship. Boswell was unique among Johnson's friends, not so much because of the closeness of his friendship as because

of the glorious uses to which he turned it. It is as though in the present century an enthusiastic young inhabitant of New York who paid a dozen visits to England were to write the most intimate biography of the greatest living English writer, who happened incidentally to be a man with a strong anti-American bias.

Boswell did not at once dedicate his life to Johnson as to a demigod in a world of ordinary men. When he wrote to Temple in 1768, excitedly triumphing in his social success in London, Johnson was only one of the great men whom he boasted of having captured. "I am really the *Great Man* now," he wrote with charming self-adulation. "I have had David Hume in the forenoon and Mr. Johnson in the afternoon of the same day visiting me. Sir John Pringle, Dr. Franklin and some company dined with me to-day; and Mr. Johnson and General Oglethorpe one day, Mr. Garrick alone another, and David Hume and some more literati

another, dine with me next week. I give admirable dinners and good claret, and the moment I go abroad again, which will be in a day or two, I set up my chariot. This is enjoying the fruit of my labours, and appearing like the friend of Paoli."

Again when, during the same year, Boswell makes one of his frequent moral slips, he bewails in a letter to Temple conduct "so unworthy of the friend of Paoli," as though Paoli rather than Johnson were the man to whom he most looked up. Nor, as has already been suggested, do the surviving letters to Johnson convey the impression that Johnson was the friend to whom he loved most to confide the entire circle of his follies and aspirations. Candid though he was, he showed only a crescent of himself to Johnson, while he was all but a full moon to Temple. He never forgot that Johnson was a sage and moralist, but he addressed Temple as a friend of his youth to whom he could boast of his sins as well as repent of them.

At the same time, it is clear that, even in the year in which he first met Johnson, he realised that the most important thing in his life had happened to him. He tells us that in the early days of their friendship he used sometimes to sit up all night, writing in his journal an account of everything in Johnson's talk worth preserving. "I remember," he declares, "having sat up four nights in one week, without being much incommoded in the day time." I doubt if in the annals of literature there is another example of such frenzied conscientiousness on the part of a lively and dissipated young man with a weak will that could scarcely resist a bottle or a "Circean charmer." Drunken and dissipated men have, contrary to the modern notion, frequently been hard and conscientious workers, but seldom on this scale. Note-taking, however, was to Boswell more than meat and drink. Robert Barclay said that he had seen "Boswell lay down knife and fork, and take out his tablets in order



to register a good anecdote," and Mrs. Thrale complained that he had a trick of "sitting steadily down at the other end of the room to write at the moment what should be said in company, either *by* Dr. Johnson or *to* him." This she condemned as ill-bred and treacherous. Johnson apparently did not share Mrs. Thrale's dislike of Boswell's note-taking. He was at once flattered and entertained. We have an account of his going into Boswell's bedroom one morning, during the Scottish tour, in order to read the latest additions to the reports of his conversations, which were at that time always submitted to him, and of his saying commendingly: "You improve: it grows better and better. . . . It might be printed, were the subject fit for printing." And, on another occasion, he helped Boswell to fill up some blanks "which I had left when first writing it, when I was not quite sure of what he had said." If Boswell was the perfect portrait-painter, Johnson, it is clear, was the perfect sitter.

Many of the dialogues in which they took part might almost have been deliberately arranged with a view to handing down a perfect portrait to future ages. We know that Boswell used sometimes to ask questions "with an assumed air of ignorance in order to incite Johnson to talk," and obviously many of his questions were asked, not for the purpose of obtaining information, but with the object of starting a game of dramatic dialogue. "Boswell's conversation," Bennet Langton once declared impatiently, "consists entirely in asking questions, and it is extremely offensive." Never, assuredly, was a man questioned on a greater variety of topics than Johnson. "I put a question to him," writes Boswell, describing one conversation, "upon a fact in common life, which he could not answer, nor have I found any one else who could. What is the reason that women servants, though obliged to be at the expense of purchasing their own clothes, have much lower wages than men servants, to whom

a greater proportion of that article is furnished, and when in fact our female house-servants work much harder than the male?" I imagine that, if Johnson did not reply to this question, it was not because he was unable, but because he was exhausted. Much as he loved to be drawn out on all manner of topics, he must often have felt like a baited witness in a law court, and more than once he protested against the torture. "I will not be put to the question," he cried angrily one evening, when he was being "teased with questions." "Don't you consider, Sir, that these are not the manners of a gentleman? I will not be baited with *what* and *why*: What is this? What is that? Why is a cow's tail long? Why is a fox's tail bushy?" And, another day, when he heard Boswell asking Levett a long series of questions about him, Johnson became similarly exasperated. "Sir," he declared, "you have but two topics, yourself and me. I am sick of both." Boswell's frank-

ness failed him when he was recording these reproofs in the "Life of Johnson," and in each case he attributed vaguely to an unnamed "gentleman" the questions that had given offence.

On the whole, however, it is safe to conclude that Johnson enjoyed being put to the question as much as Boswell enjoyed questioning him. If he had found Boswell a bore, he would not have described him as "the best travelling companion in the world." Boswell was too eagerly devoted to his great object of giving pleasure both to other people and to himself to be anything but good company. He was despised and disparaged after his death, but during his life he was a general favourite. "If general approbation will add anything to your enjoyment," Johnson wrote to him from London in 1778, "I can tell you that I have heard you mentioned as *a man whom everybody likes*. I think life has little more to give." Even Hannah More, when she first met him, wrote of him as

“ a very agreeable and good-natured man ” —a good impression which he helped to destroy by getting drunk at Bishop Shipley's. “ I was heartily disgusted,” she wrote on the second occasion, “ with Mr. Boswell, who came upstairs after dinner, disordered with wine, and addressed me in a manner which drew from me a sharp rebuke, for which I fancy he will not easily forgive me.” It is true that Mrs. Thrale hated him, that Miss Hawkins asked concerning him: “ Was this man a safe member of Society? ” that Baretti was his enemy, and that there was no love lost between him and Goldsmith; but the general opinion of him seems to have agreed with that of Sir Joshua Reynolds: “ He thaws reserve wherever he comes and sets the ball of conversation rolling,” and it is said that Sir Joshua was never happier, if Boswell was present, than when he was sitting near him. Burke had opposed his admission to the Club, but, after his admission, changed his opinion of him and declared that Boswell was a man of so much natural

good humour that good humour was scarcely a virtue in him. "Society," it was said after his death, "was his idol; to that he sacrificed everything; his eye glistened, and his countenance brightened up, when he saw the human face divine, and that person must have been very fastidious indeed who did not return him the same compliment when he came into a room." Johnson affirmed that, during their travels in Scotland, Boswell "never left a house without leaving a wish for his return." So entertaining a companion was Boswell, indeed, that Dugald Stuart maintained that his conversation was even more amusing than his writings, owing to "the picturesque style of his conversational or rather his convivial diction" and to "the humorous and somewhat whimsical seriousness of his face and manner." The truth is, Boswell was an enthusiast for the social life and was endowed with most of the gifts that make it agreeable, and this alone would have won him the affection of Johnson.

But Johnson's affection for Boswell went

deeper than the love of an entertaining companion. "I love you," he once told him, "as a kind man, I value you as a worthy man, and hope in time to reverence you as a man of exemplary piety. I hold you, as Hamlet has it, 'in my heart of hearts.' " To Johnson Boswell was a kind of favourite nephew—an excellent young man at heart, who, as the saying is, was his own worst enemy. Johnson always spoke to Boswell as to a fellow-Christian, at least in the making. "My dear Sir," he wrote to him, "mind your studies, mind your business, make your lady happy, and be a Christian." And when Boswell, who lived on bad terms with his father and would often have gladly exchanged his wife's company for that of Johnson, wrote complaining indirectly of his imprisonment in Scotland, Johnson reproved him for his love of London, adding: "I am now writing, and you, when you read this, are reading under the Eye of Omnipotence." We shall only half understand Boswell if

we do not realise that he, as well as Johnson, was in a great measure a pious man. He enjoyed going to St. Clement Danes Church with Johnson no less than sitting late with him over a bottle of port at the Mitre. It is said that, when he was a student at Glasgow University, Boswell was all but converted to Catholicism; and his attitude to religion is shown in a letter which he wrote to Sir David Dalrymple after getting to know Johnson. "I thank God," he wrote, "that I have got acquainted with Mr. Johnson. He has done me infinite service. He has assisted me to obtain peace of mind. He has assisted me to become a rational Christian."

Had Johnson not been a pious man, it is certain that Boswell would never have held him in the same reverence. They were both pious men even to the point of conventional orthodoxy. Boswell would talk seriously to Johnson of the scandal of having shops open on Good Friday, and would read "Ogden on Prayer" aloud to



him and a Scottish professor of divinity, while Johnson, in Boswell's presence, would gravely advocate the strict observance of Sunday, maintaining: "It should be different from another day. People may walk, but not throw stones at birds. There may be relaxation, but there should be no levity." There is nothing more conspicuous in the "Life" and "Journal" than Boswell's veneration for Johnson as a Christian. We see this even in his account of Johnson's eccentric habit of uttering pious ejaculations. "Dr. Johnson," Boswell wrote in the "Journal," "is often uttering pious ejaculations, when he appears to be talking to himself, for sometimes his voice grows stronger, and parts of the Lord's Prayer are to be heard. I have sat beside him with more than ordinary reverence on such occasions." It was because Johnson knew that Boswell shared his faith that, when writing a letter introducing him to John Wesley, he used the expression: "I think it very much to be wished that worthy and religious

men should be acquainted with each other." There is something comical in the coupling of John Wesley and Boswell as "worthy and religious men." Superficially, the combination is ridiculous. If Johnson had not had the genius of humanity to regard it as natural, however, he would have been less than Johnson.

Nor was it only in creeds and observances that the religion of Johnson and Boswell expressed itself. They were both men who lived largely in their affections—men who could scarcely live without affection. Boswell's cousin, whom he married, may not have shared his "roving disposition," or his tastes, or his regard for Johnson, and he may have caused her many uneasy hours, but his affection is clear in all his references to her. There is nothing uncommon in Boswell's affection for his children, but it is impossible not to like him better for the affectionate delight he shows in the way in which his infant daughter, Veronica, and Johnson got on together in

Scotland. "Mr. Johnson," he records, "was pleased with my daughter, Veronica. . . . She had the appearance of listening to him. His motions seemed to her to be intended for her amusement; and when he stopped, she fluttered, and made a little infantine noise, and a kind of signal for him to begin again. She would be held close to him; which was a proof, from simple nature, that his figure was not horrid. Her fondness for him endeared her still more to me, and I declared she should have five hundred pounds of additional fortune."

At the same time, he would be a rash man who attempted to put Boswell on a moral and domestic pedestal. He was a sentimentalist who could easily break the Ten Commandments he respected and neglect the wife and children to whom he was devoted. Johnson once said to him, referring to Mrs. Boswell; "In losing her you would lose your sheet-anchor, and be tossed without stability by the waves of life."

And, even with Mrs. Boswell to look after him, Boswell was always one who was "tossed without stability by the waves of life."

It is all the more marvellous that a man of such incurable instability of character persisted in so single-minded a fashion with his task of giving the world the perfect life of Johnson. One could almost believe that, like Socrates, he lived under the guidance of a "demon," and that his very gaucheries and follies were inspired. He was inspired, it must be remembered, not only to write about Johnson, but to persuade Johnson continually to act and talk in such a fashion as would provide material for good writing. He was not merely the reporter of conversations that would have taken place even without his prompting: he was, as has been said, the originator of many of the conversations he reported. He was in many of those conversations like a man in a bull-ring whose task it was, at whatever risk to himself, to prick the bull

into fighting spirit. He himself more than once pictured Johnson as a bull, and in a conversation with Reynolds expressed his readiness, up to a point, to be the victim. "I don't care," he said, "how often or how high he tosses me, when only friends are present, for then I fall on soft ground; but I do not like falling on stones, which is the case when enemies are present." It is sometimes suggested that Boswell was so thick-skinned that he suffered no pain in the course of these encounters, but in point of fact he combined a great deal of real sensitiveness with his apparent insensitiveness to rebuff. Once, after Johnson had tossed him, as we have seen, he would not go near him for a week, and was on the point of returning to Scotland without seeing him again when a chance meeting reconciled them. He found even the memory of his fall so painful that he did not describe the occasion of it in the biography. We learn the circumstances from another source. During a dinner at Sir Joshua's, at which the wits

of Queen Anne's reign were being discussed, Boswell remarked in picador fashion: "How delightful it must have been to have lived in the society of Pope, Swift, Arbuthnot, Gay, and Bolingbroke! We have no such society in our days." "I think, Mr. Boswell," said Sir Joshua, "you might be satisfied with your great friend's conversation." "Nay, Sir," said Johnson, "Mr. Boswell is right. Every man wishes for preferment, and if Boswell had lived in those days, he would have obtained promotion." "How so, Sir?" asked Reynolds. "Why, Sir," said Johnson, "he would have had a high place in the *Dunciad*." The way of the picador biographer is hard.

Ridiculously as Boswell often behaved, however, and irritating as an insect's buzz though his method of conversation must have sometimes been, we now realise that, as biographer elect, he made few mistakes. If at times he exasperated his contemporaries, it was for our benefit. If he asked absurd

questions and laid himself open to snubs and ridicule, it was for our pleasure. "Who is this Scotch cur at Johnson's heels?" some one asked. "He is not a cur," said Goldsmith; "you are too severe. He is only a burr. Tom Davies flung him at Johnson in sport, and he has the faculty of sticking." Bennet Langton, too, complained that Boswell "carried a night-cap in his pocket, so to speak, was blind to the inconvenience he caused, and deaf to hints that his departure would be a blessing." But, from our point of view, this is evidence of Boswell's genius. If Hawkins was an unclubbable man, Boswell was an unsnubbable man—a quality essential for the work for which he was sent into the world. His endurance of snubs, like his note-taking, was part of a tenacity of purpose astonishing in one who was temperamentally irresolute. If he was a burr, it was his demon that told him to stick to Johnson.

How ridiculous he appeared to a good

many others as he stuck to Johnson during his visits to London we may gather from Fanny Burney's account of him. She tells us that when he visited Streatham on one occasion, he "stared amazed" on finding the seat next to Johnson given to her instead of to himself, and that he immediately "got another chair and placed it at the back of the shoulder of Dr. Johnson." If Johnson was present, according to Miss Burney, Boswell listened to no one else as he waited for the great man to speak, and, at the first word, "his eyes goggled with eagerness; he leant his ear almost on the shoulder of the doctor; and his mouth dropped open to catch every syllable that might be uttered." He gave the impression that so slavish was his worship of Johnson that he unconsciously imitated him in the mock-solemnity of his manner, his slouching gait, his large, loose clothes, and his untidy wig. It is clear to all the world to-day, however, that, if Boswell made himself appear a slave, it was his means of becoming



a prince among biographers. A dinner at Mrs. Thrale's was not merely a momentary entertainment at which good manners were all-important, but a potential scene in a masterpiece, demanding the mannerless application of an artist.

Nor did he ever make a mistake in so far as he stage-managed and directed Johnson's life for him. He brought about the meeting with Wilkes at Mr. Dilly's. He brought about the visit of Johnson, at the age of sixty-four, to Scotland. Here, as in the conversations, we need not suspect Boswell of always consciously arranging events in such a way as to provide himself with copy. Even if he had not been a biographer, it is clear that he was a man who would have enjoyed immensely the game of bringing Johnson and Wilkes together and seeing how they would behave. Even so, it is a legitimate fancy that, in "negotiating" the meeting, he was inspired by his demon.

And his demon stood him in good stead,

not only in his collection of the materials for the "Life," but in the compilation of it. "Many a time," he told Temple, five years after Johnson's death, "have I thought of giving it up." With a temperament that swung like a pendulum between cheerfulness and depression, with political ambitions that continually came to nothing, with a tendency, especially after his wife's death in 1789, to "seek relief in dissipation and in wine" with loss of health in consequence, with money troubles that did not cease when he became Laird of Auchinleck, he nevertheless persisted with his great task, buoyed up by the belief that it would be the most remarkable book of its kind ever written. "I think," he wrote to Temple, "it will be without exception the most entertaining book you ever read."

In this faith he laboured at his book with the double assiduity of an historian and an artist. As a chronicler, he would "run half over London in order to fix a date correctly." As an artist, he did not

merely report Johnson's conversation : he remoulded it in order that it might live the more brightly and dramatically in literature. Many writers have commented on the liberties he took with Johnson's observation on Tom Sheridan's attempt to improve the English language by teaching oratory. In the "Life" Johnson is represented as saying : "What influence can Mr. Sheridan have upon the language of this great country? Sir, it is burning a farthing candle at Dover to show light at Calais!" In Boswell's notes, however, what Johnson said appears as : "He is like a man attempting to stride the English Channel. Sir, the cause bears no proportion to the effect. It is setting up a candle at Whitechapel to give light at Westminster." Artistic liberties of this kind must be judged by their results, and who can doubt that, the more liberties Boswell took with Johnson's phrases, the more truthfully he portrayed Johnson? His mind, as he himself said, was "strongly

impregnated with the Johnsonian ether," and the veracity of the portraiture is proved by the fact that the Johnson of the "Life" is in all essentials the same man as the Johnson of the "Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides"—"the very same Journal," as Boswell described it, "which Dr. Johnson read."

Boswell, indeed, was more often accused of excessive frankness by Johnson's friends than of inaccuracy. When he was publishing the "Tour to the Hebrides," Hannah More begged him to "mitigate" some of Johnson's asperities, and he replied—"roughly," according to her—that "he would not cut off his claws, nor make his tiger a cat, to please anybody." Boswell was determined to be as candid about Johnson as he was about himself, realising that, if Johnson with his claws uncut was good enough to know and love in life, he must also be good enough to know and love in a biography. There may be something to be said for concealing the faults of a

great man who had himself concealed them. But Johnson's "asperities" were open and public "asperities," and Boswell showed genius as well as courage, not in dragging secret and scandalous things to light, but in perpetuating the living Johnson as his friends had known and loved him.

Happily, when the "Life" was published in April 1791, the world agreed with Boswell's own estimate of it. A few months after its appearance, he who had begged for appointments all his life and obtained but few was rewarded with an appointment as Secretary for Foreign Correspondence to the Royal Academy. He enjoyed the success of his book with his customary innocent vanity. When Wilkes met him and praised it, he wrote off to him on the following day: "You said to me yesterday of my *Magnum Opus*, 'It is a wonderful book.' Do confirm this to me, so as I may have your *testimonium* in my archives at Auchinleck." There you have the old Boswell—the Boswell who treasured every

little candle that had helped to light up the figure of James Boswell, the "Great Man," during his appearances on the social and literary stage. He never changed indeed. During the last year of his life he was still troubled about his debts; he was still drinking—"I do resolve anew to be on my guard," he wrote repentantly to Temple; he was still "presenting his compliments" to eminent men—the month before his death he wrote from his bed to congratulate Warren Hastings on his acquittal; he was still the disciple of Johnson, and was still engaged in revising the "Life" when he died. He died in 1795 at the age of fifty-four. The manuscript materials for the "Life" of Johnson, which he intended for posterity, were, through the negligence of his executors, handed over to his family, who destroyed them. It was an impious act of piety, but perhaps we are not greatly the losers by it. We know both Boswell and Johnson almost as well as human beings can be known more than a century

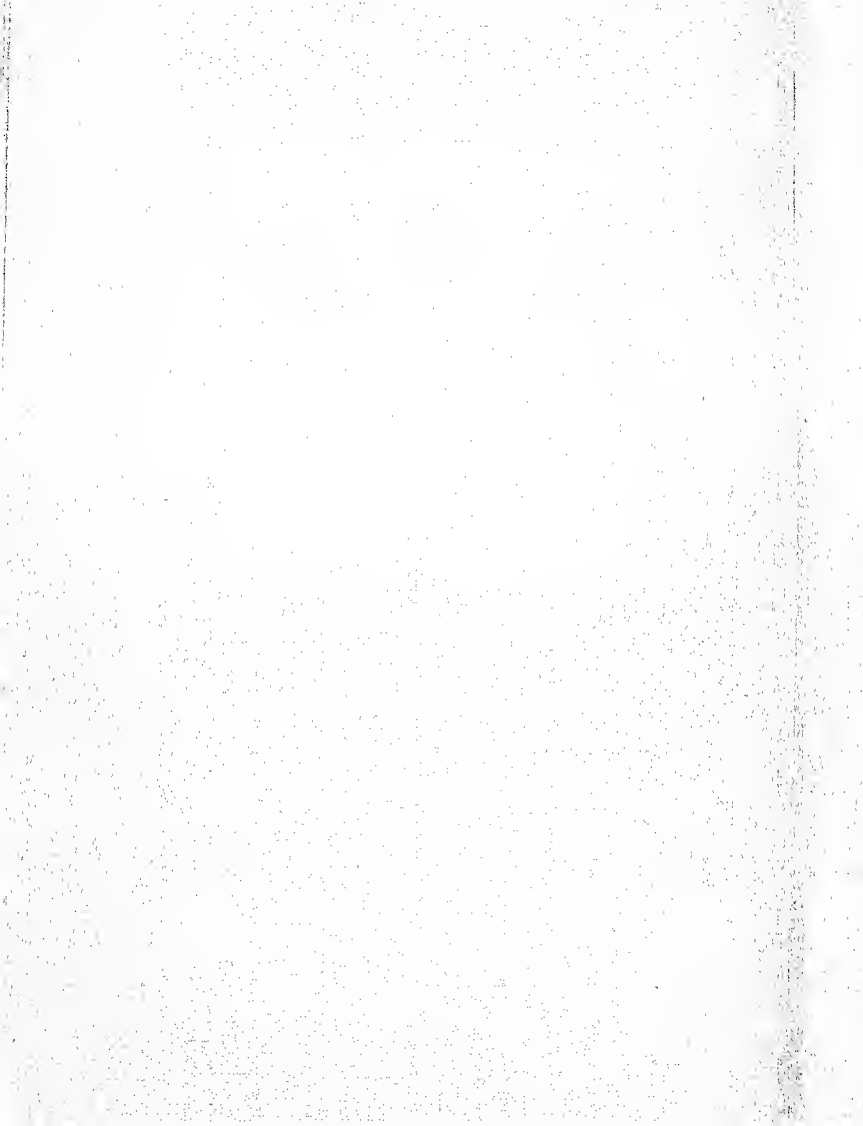
after they are dead. Of all the men whose lives have been recorded for us, there is no other pair whom, with a knowledge of every peak and inlet of their characters, we find such perpetually good company.

---

*The Earliest Friends*

---





"THE catfish," says Mr. H. W. Nevins in one of the most admirable of his essays, "is the demon of the deep, and keeps things lively." Johnson, though the least demoniacal of mortals, had the genius of the catfish even in his boyhood. Both in his appearance and in his conversation he always had the fascination of a strange and powerful creature, whose presence produced a stir of excitement whatever the company. We know nothing of his first schooling when he was learning English from Tom Brown—memorable as the man who "published a spelling-book and dedicated it to the Universe"—but at Lichfield Grammar School, to which he went at the age of seven, he seems quickly to have established himself as an idolised despot among his fellow-pupils. "Such,"

says Boswell, "was the submission and deference with which he was treated, such the desire to obtain his regard, that three of the boys, of whom Mr. Hector was sometimes one, used to come in the morning as his humble attendants, and carry him to school. One in the middle stooped, while he sat upon his back, and one on each side supported him; and thus he was borne triumphant."

There is a legendary air about this picture of the royal progress of the dim-sighted young giant. But Johnson was a boy whose whole life was to become a legend, and he was the sort of schoolboy about whom other schoolboys inevitably narrate legends. He was a heroic idler who studied little and yet learned more than any one else; and that he kept things lively for the others is clear from Hector's statement that "he never knew him corrected at school, but for talking and diverting other boys from their business."

At Pembroke College, Oxford, where he

passed fourteen months of his life and which he left without taking a degree, he continued the career of a notable idler—an idler being frequently a youth who learns, not systematically, but voraciously and by fits and starts—and we have an attractive picture of him lounging at the College gate, with a circle of admiring fellow-students round him, whom he used to keep from their studies with his wit. Poor and at times almost mad with melancholy, he was even then the miserable being in solitude and the king of entertainment in company that he always remained. “A gay and frolicsome fellow”—so the President of the College afterwards described him; but Johnson’s comment on this, when he was told of it was: “Ah, Sir, I was mad and violent. It was bitterness which they mistook for frolic. I was miserably poor, and I thought to fight my way by my literature and my wit.”

He was at least frolicsome enough at times to join in the sport of “hunting the

servitor " (whose duty it was to go round at night and see that all the young men were in their rooms) to the tune of Chevy Chase " with the noise of pots and candlesticks "; and that his madness and violence did not lose him the sympathy of his fellow-students is shown by the story of the undergraduate who, noticing that Johnson's feet were visible through his only pair of shoes, had a new pair of shoes left at the door of his room. The fact that Johnson, on seeing the shoes, flung them angrily away is often quoted as an example of his noble pride; but the story of the shoes is also evidence of the affection and admiration that followed Johnson from his earliest days.

How tenacious he was in his friendships and how tenaciously his friends clung to him may be gathered from the fact that the chief friendships he formed at school and at Oxford became lifelong friendships. The first friend of all was Edmund Hector, who was at school with him at Lichfield

and who afterwards became a surgeon in Birmingham. It was in Hector's rooms in Birmingham that Johnson found refuge after his miserable experiences as an usher in the school at Market Bosworth, and it was during this stay at Birmingham that, at the age of twenty-four he began his career in literature by translating Lobo's "Voyage to Abyssinia" for a local printer for the sum of five guineas. Had it not been for Hector, the translation would probably never have been finished, owing to Johnson's disease of indolence. Hector, however, persuaded him that the delay was causing suffering to the printer and his family, and at length Johnson roused himself in characteristically lazy fashion. "He lay in bed with the book, which was a quarto," says Boswell, "and dictated while Hector wrote."

It was during a visit to Hector—"Mund," as he called him, with his love of affectionate abbreviations—that another important event occurred in the life of Johnson: his

introduction to his future wife, a lady at that time almost twice as old as himself. About thirty years later, Johnson took Boswell to Birmingham on a visit to Hector, and, while there, confessed that Hector's sister (by this time Mrs. Careless, the widow of a clergyman) was the first woman he had ever loved, adding later: "If I had married her, it might have been as happy for me." Thus the friendship with Hector was a friendship rich in associations for Johnson, and that it never wavered is clear from an entry in Johnson's journal towards the end of his life, in which, when referring to Hector, he wrote: "We have always loved one another." Hector lived long enough to assist Boswell in writing some important passages of the "Life" and to welcome it enthusiastically on its publication.

Another lifelong friend who knew and loved Johnson as a boy in Lichfield was the Rev. John Taylor, D.D., of Ashbourne. The youthful Taylor's devotion was such

that, when Johnson was at Oxford, he wished to follow him to Pembroke College, though on Johnson's recommendation he ultimately chose Christ Church. When Boswell accompanied Johnson on a visit to him half-a-century later in 1776, Taylor was a wealthy country clergyman and magistrate with a fine estate, and Boswell speaks with respect of the "large roomy post-chaise, drawn by four stout plump horses and driven by two stout jolly postillions," which Taylor provided for them. We meet the prosperous and worldly Taylor oftener than Hector in the "Life," but it is clear that Taylor did not occupy so large a place in Johnson's heart. Mrs. Thrale suggests that Johnson's friendship for him "had a dash of interest to keep it warm," and was strengthened by the expectation of being left his heir. That, however, was said at a time of bitterness, and even Mrs. Thrale speaks of Taylor elsewhere as one to whom Johnson "perpetually turned—not to his flatterers and



admirers—ever sighing for the toast, bread and butter of life, when satiated with the turtle and Burgundy of it.” And in the “Anecdotes” she quotes Johnson himself as saying, in the course of a discussion on who should be his biographer: “Why, Taylor is better acquainted with my heart than any man or woman now alive.”

It is probable, however, that Johnson’s friendship with Taylor was the result of early associations as much as of congeniality of tempers. If Johnson loved him, he loved him critically and in spite of repeated exasperation. Their arguments at times became violent, for they differed on politics and on theology, and, in the course of one argument, Johnson roused Taylor to a “pitch of bellowing” by contending “that, if England were fairly polled, the present King would be sent away to-night, and his adherents hanged to-morrow.”

Johnson, indeed, was prepared to dispute with Taylor on the smallest occasions. Taylor, who was much given to praising his large and small possessions, had a bull-

dog of which he extolled the perfect shape to Johnson. "No, sir," declared Johnson authoritatively, though he can scarcely have been an authority on such a subject, "he is *not* well-shaped, for there is not the quick transition from the thickness of the forepart to the *tenuity*—the thin part—behind—which a bulldog ought to have." Johnson showed the same spirit of contentiousness when Taylor, whose nose happened to bleed, spoke in favour of being "blooded" regularly by a doctor and expressed his dislike of emetics as a means of obtaining relief, on the ground that they might cause the rupture of some small vessels. "Pooh!" cried Johnson derisively, "if you have so many small things that will break, you had better break your neck at once, and there's an end on't." It is no wonder that, in the course of the visit, Taylor said confidently to Boswell: "There is no disputing with him. He will not hear you, and, having a louder voice than you, must roar you down." And Johnson himself obviously became irritated

as a result of having to roar Taylor down so often. "Sir," he told Boswell, "I love him, but I do not love him more; my regard for him does not increase. As it is said in the Apocrypha, 'his talk is of bullocks': I do not suppose he is very fond of my company. His habits are by no means sufficiently clerical: this he knows that I see, and no man likes to live under the eye of perpetual disapprobation."

The portrait of Taylor that we get in Boswell is certainly not that of the ideal clergyman. "His size, and figure, and countenance, and manner," says Boswell, "were that of a hearty English Squire, with the parson superinduced," and his virtues, as he lives among his cows and his country employments, seem those of a squire rather than a parson. His indolence shocked even the indolent Dr. Johnson. Taylor, he declared, had "such a sort of indolence that, if you should put a penny upon his chimney-piece, you would find it there, in the same state, a year afterwards." This indolence, no doubt,

was the cause of his getting Johnson on a good many occasions to write his sermons for him. Still, however warmly they might disapprove of each other, Johnson and Taylor were usually glad to meet. Their quarrels were as transitory as lovers' quarrels.

Johnson had quarrels of the kind with most of his friends, and it is evidence of his essential loveliness that so many men of all sorts and conditions remained his friends in spite of them. Johnson, indeed, had in his grotesque way a charm as irresistible as Cleopatra's. We have hundreds of instances of it, but none better than his reply when his negro servant came in and announced: "Sir, Dr. Taylor sends his compliments to you and begs you will dine with him to-morrow. He has got a hare." "My compliments," said Johnson, "and I'll dine with him—hare or rabbit." What more flattering answer could have been given by mortal man?

The strength of the lifelong bonds that united Johnson to Taylor may be measured

by the fact that, on the death of Mrs. Johnson, it was to Taylor that he turned for consolation. It was Taylor whom he asked to officiate at the funeral service at Bromley, and it is said that he tried to persuade Taylor on this occasion to deliver a sermon that he himself had composed in praise of Mrs. Johnson, but that Taylor dissuaded him (in Hawkins's words) "from so ostentatious a display of the virtues of a woman who, though she was his wife, was but little known." In the summer of 1784, when he was himself about to die, Johnson again turned to Taylor for the consolations of friendship.

Taylor at this date was no longer the hearty man of earlier times, but was an old man, going to bed at nine, and "following" a milk diet; and that Johnson was disappointed by his last visit to Ashbourne we gather from his complaint in a letter to George Nichol: "My friend is sick himself, and the vociferation of complaints and groans affords not much of either pleasure or instruction." When Johnson

was lying on his deathbed in November and December, however, we find the faithful Taylor reading prayers at his bedside, and, at his funeral in Westminster Abbey, it was Taylor who "performed the mournful office of reading the burial service." "Dr. Taylor," Johnson had said many years before, "is the same one day and another," commending him as one who did not swing uneasily as he himself did, between dejection and high spirits. There could not be a finer symbol of the unchangeableness of Dr. Johnson himself, in a far profounder sense, than the fact that it was the friend of his boyhood whom he summoned, when they were both old men, to pray at his deathbed.

Johnson, indeed, was a man who never forgot an old friend or an old association. Even though he became the greatest of Londoners, he remained in his affections a Lichfield man to the end. We find him in the "Lives of the Poets" going out of his way to pay a posthumous tribute to an early benefactor, Gilbert Walmsley, the

learned Registrar of the Prerogative Court of Lichfield, who had given him and Garrick introductions when they came to London as strangers. It was characteristic of Johnson that he should do this, while being too indolent to write Walmsley's epitaph, though he knew that the dead man's widow was eagerly waiting for it in order to place it on her husband's gravestone. It is also characteristic of one who did not succeed in writing the epitaphs on his father and mother till a fortnight before his death that he was still engaged in writing Walmsley's epitaph during his last illness, and that it was only on hearing from the doctor of his own critical condition that he "pushed the papers from before him, saying, 'It was too late to write the epitaph of another when he should so soon want one himself.'"

It was from Lichfield, again, that Johnson inherited Mrs. Desmoulins, the daughter of his godfather, Dr. Swinfen, one of the distressed ladies to whom he gave house-room in London and who, in spite of her

tedious quarrelsomeness, deserves our liking for having left it on record that Mrs. Johnson was, contrary to the burlesque evidence of Garrick, "still handsome" at the time of her marriage to Johnson. It was at Lichfield (or at Edial, near Lichfield, where Johnson "set up" a boarding school with his wife's four hundred pounds) that David Garrick became first his pupil and afterwards his friend—a friendship that survived till the "stroke of death," though Garrick often loved to caricature Johnson, and Johnson again and again derided and disparaged Garrick.

When master and pupil set out for London in March 1737, Johnson with the manuscript of three acts of a tragedy in his pocket and each with a letter of introduction to a clergyman, Johnson was twenty-seven years old and Garrick twenty. They had few points of resemblance save their love of talking. Garrick was a small, vain, mercurial man born under a lucky star, and with the genius and graces that lead to success both on the stage and in



society. "He began the world," said Johnson, "with a great hunger for money. The son of a half-pay officer, he was bred in a family whose study was to make fourpence do as much as others made fourpence-halfpenny do." And, while Johnson was too unbusinesslike even to earn a comfortable living, Garrick had businesslike virtues that in the course of a few years made him a rich man and the most prosperous figure on the London stage. Originally intended for the law, he turned wine-merchant on receiving a legacy of a thousand pounds from an uncle—a trade in which he lost instead of making money. By the age of twenty-four, however, he had gone on the stage and captured London with his performance of Richard III at Goodman's Fields, where before long he had "a dozen dukes of a night to see him," and Pope was among the most enthusiastic of his auditors, declaring that he was the greatest actor the world had ever seen.

If we can believe Boswell, Johnson was filled with envy as he watched Garrick's

sudden progress to fame and riches, while he himself remained an obscure hack-writer with his genius unacknowledged. But there is no need to take very seriously an envy that permitted the friendship to continue till it was severed by death. Nor is it necessary to impute to mere envy of Garrick Johnson's frequent contemptuous explosions against actors. They may have been due in still greater measure to his inability to enjoy good acting owing to the fact that he could neither see nor hear well. Besides, the prejudice against actors is not such a rare thing that we need be surprised to find it in so downright an English moralist as Johnson. Garrick, it is said, was in later life greatly hurt by Johnson's slighting references to him, but he could always recover his good humour by mimicking his disparager, aping his voice and manner in such sentences as: "Davy has some convivial pleasantry, but 'tis a futile fellow." Some of Garrick's mimicries were of a kind just as likely to dissolve a friendship as Johnson's sneers. Had Johnson known of

Garrick's exciting "the heartiest bursts of laughter" by his imitation of Mrs. Johnson he would scarcely have forgiven him, and he might even have been offended by the imitation of his own provincial accent, when Garrick described him as squeezing a lemon into a punch-bowl with not over-clean hands, looking round the company, and calling out, "Whose for *poonsh*?" "He must have been a stout man," said Garrick, "who would have been for it." Boswell, much as he hated suppressing anything, humanely suppressed this comment of Garrick's as well as the reference to Johnson's hands.

It is one of the great charms of Boswell's "Life" that here, as nowhere else in biography, we overhear a large group of remarkable and likeable men and women giving their candid opinions of each other, if not always to each other, so that almost every friendship in the book is variegated with an occasional outbreak of hostilities. And nowhere do we find Johnson more pugnacious than in his friendship with

Garrick. He attacked Garrick to his face, and behind his back if any one else praised him, and at the same time he attacked any one else who dared to attack Garrick. Sir Joshua Reynolds said, in explanation of this, that he "considered Garrick as his property and would never suffer any one to praise or abuse him but himself." Boswell had only to say enthusiastically, "Who can repeat Hamlet's soliloquy, 'To be or not to be,' as Garrick does it?" for Johnson to declare contemptuously, "Any one may. Jemmy, there" (a boy about eight years old who was in the room) "will do it as well in a week." But let Boswell, from a love of mischief, attack Garrick for having allowed his success to go to his head, and Johnson is at once up in arms in his defence with the magnificently honest retort: "If all this had happened to me, I should have had a couple of fellows with long poles walking before me, to knock down everybody that stood in the way."

It is a pity that Hannah More had no gift for recording conversation, for she was

present at a conversation between Johnson and Garrick that convinced her of the truth of the saying that one could "never properly enjoy the company of these two unless they are together." It is true that, in a letter written in the same year, she had said: "To enjoy Dr. Johnson perfectly, one must have him to oneself, as he seldom cares to speak in mixed parties." But she changed her mind on that evening on which she was a witness of a "close encounter" between him and Garrick when the rest of the company "all stood around them close on an hour, laughing in defiance of every rule of decorum and Chesterfield." Unfortunately, she, like Boswell, has treasured none of the wit that made Garrick's conversation as exhilarating to his contemporaries as champagne. In the reports of the verbal encounters between Garrick and Johnson, it is Johnson's knock-out wit alone that is recorded. "Why," said Garrick to him one day, "did you not make me a Tory? You love to make people Tories." "Why," replied Johnson,

pulling a handful of halfpence from his pocket, "did not the King make these guineas?" Again, when, after the publication of the "Dictionary," Johnson asked Garrick what was being said of it and Garrick told him that "it was objected that he cited authorities which were beneath the dignity of such a work," giving Richardson as an example, "Nay," chuckled Johnson, "I have done worse than that: I have cited *thee*, David."

Yet in these interchanges Garrick cannot always have played the part of a boxer's punch-ball. Not by such passivity can he have won Johnson's high commendation: "He is the first man in the world for sprightly conversation," or that posthumous compliment: "And after all, Madam, I thought him less to be envied on the stage than at the head of a table." No doubt, Garrick's conversation was of a kind in which the wit evaporates—Johnson himself said that there was "no solid meat in it"—but one wishes it were possible to recapture a little more of that gaiety and good

humour with which the small stout man who loved to give pleasure gave pleasure to Dr. Johnson.

Of Garrick's generosity of heart there is abundant evidence. When he became manager of Drury Lane Theatre, he at once resolved to produce "Irene," the tragedy that Johnson had begun to write before leaving Lichfield for London. And their friendship survived even this, though the play was a failure and Johnson had shown all an author's irascibility on the eve of its production. He and Garrick had one violent quarrel when Garrick tried to persuade him that some alterations were necessary for stage purposes. "Sir," cried Johnson, denouncing Garrick to Dr. Taylor, "the fellow wants me to make Mahomet run mad, that he may have an opportunity of tossing his hands and kicking his heels." Johnson, however, recovered his good humour, and we find him watching his doomed play from a box, gaily dressed for the occasion, as he had never been dressed before, "in a scarlet waistcoat with rich

gold lace, and a gold-laced hat." After the play had failed, he was asked how he felt about it, and replied stoically, "Like the Monument." He was at this time forty years old and had published three of the works that were to make him famous in literature. For "London" he had received ten guineas; for "The Life of Savage" fifteen; and for "The Vanity of Human Wishes" fifteen. "Irene," fortunately, though it failed after a run of nine performances, brought Johnson three nights' profits as well as a hundred pounds from a publisher.

It is clear that Johnson never forgot Garrick's generosity on this occasion. Again and again he defended Garrick against the charges of meanness and miserliness commonly levelled at him. He admitted that once, when he was drinking tea with Garrick, he had heard him grumbling at Peg Woffington for making the tea too strong, and crying, "Why, it is as red as blood!" But how generously Johnson praised the generous Garrick in the memor-



able ejaculation : " Sir, a liberal man. He has given away more money than any man in England." Johnson was as lavish of his praise as of his blame. No other actor has ever been praised as Garrick is praised in the " Lives of the Poets " in that epitaph which, if nothing else of his writings had survived, would prove Johnson to have been among the supreme masters of English prose. Nothing is more often quoted, and nothing is less staled by quotation, than the passage in which he expresses his regret that Garrick did not live to read his tribute to their common friend, Gilbert Walmesley : " But what are the hopes of man ! I am disappointed by the stroke of death, which has eclipsed the gaiety of nations and impoverished the public stock of harmless pleasures."

We have it on the authority of Arthur Murphy that, after Garrick's death, Johnson " never talked of him without a tear in his eyes," and, though there may be exaggeration in this, we have practical evidence of the warmth of Johnson's feelings

towards Garrick in his desire to prepare an edition of his works and write his life. Garrick's widow, unfortunately, did not accept the offer or even reply to it. Perhaps she remembered, not without bitterness, the essay in "The Rambler" in which Johnson had portrayed Garrick satirically as Prospero—a satire as deadly in its attack as the letter to Lord Chesterfield itself.

Though Garrick was the first friend Johnson possessed in London, however, he was not Johnson's closest companion even in the early years, when both were unknown. They separated on their arrival in town, when Johnson took lodgings in the house of a stay-maker in Exeter Street, and for the next year or two his most important acquaintances are to be found among publishers and printers. The chief of these was Edward Cave of *The Gentlemen's Magazine*, for whom he wrote a current account of the Parliamentary debates largely out of his imagination, inventing a speech for Chatham which is still popularly believed to be Chatham's own—the speech begin-

ning, "Sir, the atrocious crime of being a young man. . . ." "That speech," said Johnson, according to Murphy, on hearing it praised, many years later, as better than Demosthenes—"that speech I wrote in a garret in Exeter Street." The reference to Exeter Street is inaccurate, for Johnson was not living there at the time at which he wrote the report. But we have other authority besides Murphy's for regarding Johnson's Parliamentary reports as largely fictitious, and Boswell tells us that he gave up the work in the end because he "would not be accessory to the propagation of falsehood," and that, a little before his death, his conscience was still troubling him for having passed off fiction as fact in the debates.

While he was still engaged in fabricating speeches for Members of Parliament, however, Johnson had fallen in with another friend who has interested posterity more than any of the publishers for whom he drudged so gratefully. This was Richard Savage, poet, Bohemian, blackmailer, homi-

cide, the friend of Steele and the protégé of Pope. It was enough that he should be an author in distress and an entertaining conversationalist to make Johnson warm to him. Johnson never for a moment doubted that he was, as he declared, the illegitimate son of the Countess of Macclesfield, whose cruelty had not shrunk from trying to send him into slavery in the American Plantations or even from trying to have him hanged. That he was an impostor is now considered rather more probable, and even Johnson, with all the background of Savage's alleged wrongs to excite our sympathy, cannot make him a very attractive character. Savage was an extraordinary egotist. He regarded it as his right to live at the expense of others, like Mr. Shaw's artist in "The Devil's Disciple." He was vain, disappointed, and a sponge. He thought that he ought to have been made Poet Laureate after the death of Eusden, and, when the appointment was given to Colley Cibber instead he immediately assumed the title of Volunteer

Laureate, though Cibber protested that he might as well have called himself a Volunteer Lord or a Volunteer Baronet. Perhaps we may see evidence of his egotism even in the importance he attached to every comma in his now-forgotten writings. "The intrusion or omission of a comma," says Johnson, "was sufficient to discompose him, and he would lament an error of a single letter as a heavy calamity."

Savage was a lean, middle-sized man with a long, melancholy face, a solemn, dignified air, and a mournful voice. He had something of the charm, however, of those philosophic debtors whom Dickens knew how to portray. He had social gifts which made him equally at home at the tables of the great and among the criminals with whose conversation he "diverted himself" when in prison for debt. Johnson admits that, in his conversation, "he could not easily leave off when he had once begun to mention himself or his works," and that "he was generally censured for not knowing when to retire," but he also maintains

that he "excelled in the arts of conversation," and Savage seems to have been able to go into almost any tavern without a penny and drink what he wished at the expense of strangers who were enchanted by his manners and his talk. Add to this the fact that, whatever his practice, this companion of thieves and beggars was sound in his religious and moral principles, and as compassionate as he was vain and vindictive, and you will see at once that he was a rare and curious character who was bound to interest the imagination and the heart of a man with such an appetite for human nature as Dr. Johnson. Something of the humbug charm with which he won Johnson still emanates from the cheerful letter which he wrote during his last and fatal imprisonment, in which he declared: "I am now more conversant with the Nine than ever, and if, instead of a Newgate bird, I may be allowed to be a bird of the Muses, I assure you, Sir, I sing very freely in my cage; sometimes, indeed, in the plaintive notes of the nightin-

gale; but at others, in the cheerful strains of the lark."

Johnson's friendship with Savage, whom he first met at Cave's house, began when he was in his late twenties, and may have grown all the closer as a result of his temporary estrangement from his wife. He and Savage were both writers, both poor, and both unhappy. It was a period of such extreme poverty for them, indeed, that they did not always know where to turn for a night's lodging. Johnson once told Reynolds of a night that he and Savage had spent at the time walking round St. James's Square homeless, and yet, in spite of their miseries, in the highest spirits. "In high spirits and brimful of patriotism," he declared, they "traversed the square for several hours, inveighed against the Minister, and resolved they would stand by their country."

Boswell asserts that, during the time of his association with Savage, Johnson was less strictly virtuous, in the common acceptance of the word, than he had been through-

out his youth and than he was during the later period of which we have so intimate a record. Bishop Percy indignantly denies this, and suggests that it is a base invention on the part of Boswell, founded on the fact that Johnson (like Mr. Gladstone) used to talk to women of the town "in order to reclaim them from their evil life." Boswell was not yet born at the time of Johnson's friendship with Savage, and Bishop Percy was not yet acquainted with him, so that, according to his judgment and temperament, the individual reader may believe what he likes about the matter.

We certainly know that Johnson did not shrink at any time from mingling freely in company that would have shocked most Puritans. "I have known all the wits," he once boasted, "from Mrs. Montague to Bet Flint." "Bet Flint," cried Mrs. Thrale; "pray who is she?" "Oh, a fine character, Madam," declared Johnson; "she was habitually a slut and a drunkard, and occasionally a thief and a harlot." Bet Flint, it must be admitted, was an excep-



tional kind of reprobate, who had written her "Life" in verse. But Johnson's charity to the more ordinary Bet Flints was conspicuous throughout his life. There is the story, for example, of his once discovering a woman of the town all but dying in the street as he was going home along Fleet Street at two o'clock in the morning. He wrapped his coat round her, carried her home on his back, and, though she was suffering from a foul disease, kept her in his house about thirteen weeks in the hope of mending her body and reforming her character. When she was well, he raised a sum of money among his friends, and set her up as a milliner with the happiest results. Johnson himself—according to a story which, if it is authentic, is evidence in favour of Bishop Percy's view—used to tell of another prostitute whom he had tried to reform and who, on being asked by him for what purpose she supposed her Maker had bestowed so much beauty on her, replied: "To please the gentlemen, to be sure; for what other use could it be

given me?" It is clear that Johnson mingled without prudery or harshness of judgment among the Jolly Beggars of his time, at once seeing the comedy and doing his best to mitigate the tragedy of their lives.

"Those are no proper judges of his conduct," he says, writing of Savage, "who have slumbered away their time in the house of plenty." And there have been few men of orthodox piety and evangelistic zeal who have been less censorious in their attitude to male and female sinners of all sorts. This was due to the fact that not only was Johnson, in Hawkins's phrase, "a great lover of penitents" and of possible penitents, but that he himself was a man more than ordinarily subject to the common temptations, who went through life regarding himself mournfully as one of the chief of sinners. He would have condemned himself bitterly if he had lived as Savage lived, but he did not condemn Savage.

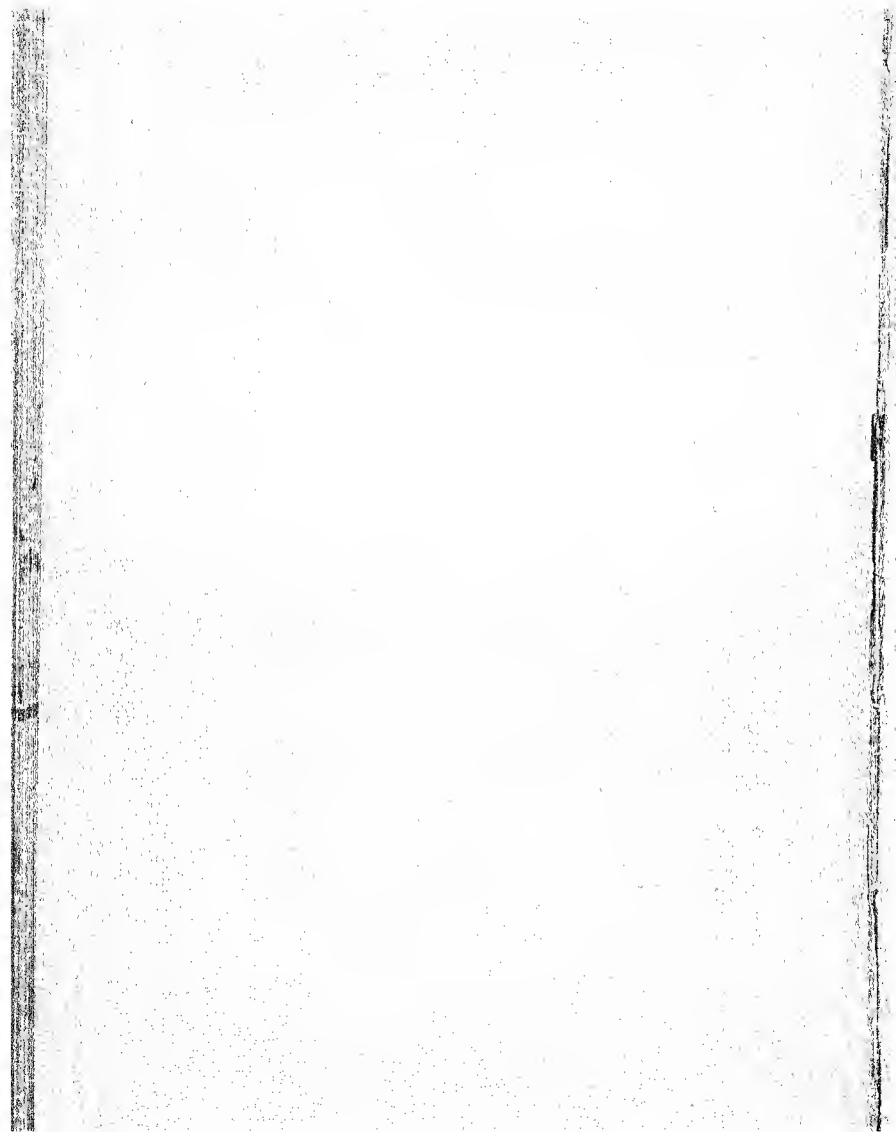
Possibly, however, he was as much relieved as were Savage's other friends

when in 1739 Savage was given a pension—or, rather, a bribe—to quit London and to go and live at Swansea. After his departure, Johnson, who was not yet quite thirty, apparently abandoned some of his Bohemian ways and settled down to the quiet life of a water-drinker. He retained his affection for his old friend sufficiently, however, to write his biography after Savage's death in prison—a book so ingenuous in its pleas for the defence that one suspects Johnson of half-smiling as he wrote some of his gravest sentences. That his separation from such Ishmaelitish company had not brought him much prosperity in the meantime is shown by the story of the dinner at Cave's at which, being too shabbily dressed to appear before strangers, he remained behind a screen and had his food sent round to him, while he listened with delight to the praises heaped by a guest who was unaware of his presence on his newly-published "Life of Savage."

---

*A Pre-Boswell Group*

---



EVEN so, I suspect, the poverty of Johnson about the time of the dinner at Cave's has been exaggerated. We know so little of his life during the following two years that legend has associated his temporary disappearance from literary history with the Jacobite Rebellion, but by the year 1747 his position as an author and scholar had become so well established that the booksellers offered him £1575 to compile an English Dictionary. It was scarcely a pauper who moved into the house in Gough Square and settled down to his gigantic task, surrounded by six amanuenses, five of whom, as Boswell delightedly informs us, were Scotsmen. It is true that the Johnson of those days was no "best-seller," in the modern phrase, and that the now-famous "Rambler," begun when he was

forty-one, was so little of a success that he confessed in the last number: "I have never been much of a favourite with the public." But it is probable that his income was limited as much by his own negligence as by the neglect of the booksellers.

And all the time he was increasing his reputation and increasing, what was as important to him, the number of his friends. One of his earliest friends was Samuel Richardson, novelist, moralist, and printer, a small, vain, benevolent man, whom he admired rather than loved. It was in reference to Richardson's vanity that Johnson made one of his most acute and amusing remarks to Mrs. Thrale. "You think I love flattery," he said to her, "and so I do; but a little too much always disgusts me: that fellow Richardson, on the contrary, could not be contented to sail quietly down the stream of reputation, without longing to taste the froth from every stroke of the oar." Johnson, indeed, declared that Richardson died of the monot-

ony of listening always to the same flatterers, "like a man obliged to breathe the same air till it is exhausted." Yet, however much he may have been disgusted by Richardson's vanity, he was always generous in his praise of him as an author, and in this way paid a part of the debt he owed to one who had occasionally rescued him from the bailiffs. "I remember writing to him" he once said—and the story throws a pleasant light both on Richardson and on Johnson—"from a sponging house; and was so sure of my deliverance through his kindness and liberality that, before his reply was brought, I knew I could afford to joke with the rascal who had me in custody, and did so, over a pint of adulterated wine, for which, at that instant, I had no money to pay." There is a letter extant written to Richardson by Johnson at the age of forty-six, announcing that he had been arrested for a debt of £5 18s., which, besides showing Johnson's confidence in Richardson's good nature, shows that even



the success of the "Dictionary" had left him more famous than permanently solvent.

As for the years during which he was at work on the "Dictionary," they were years in which his fame, though growing, was still little more than at its dawn. He was not yet a great man recognised by great men, and most of his friends were among the comparatively obscure.

There is not a single one of the ten members of the Ivy Lane Club, which he founded in 1749, who is remembered to-day by ordinary men except as a friend of Johnson. There was Hawkesworth, whom he assisted on the *Adventurer*, and who afterwards committed suicide because of what the critics said about his work on Captain Cook. There were three physicians, for Johnson always loved doctors and medicine. There were a clergyman, a merchant, a bookseller who afterwards became chief accountant of the Bank of England, and Samuel Dyer, who was later also a member

of Johnson's Literary Club, but who in spite of this is little more than a supernumerary in Boswell's "Life." And there was Mr. (afterwards Sir) John Hawkins, lawyer, writer, and Justice of the Peace, who was ultimately to win a doubtful immortality as Johnson's official biographer. It is characteristic of Johnson's broad human sympathies that he who had been happy walking the streets all night with Savage should also enjoy arguing about the non-observance of Good Friday in the ultra-respectable company of Hawkins. It is characteristic, too, of his tolerance and his fidelity that he retained Hawkins among his friends till the day of his death.

For Hawkins was not a likeable man. He is the only famous friend of Johnson's of whom no one ever seems to have said an entirely good word. "A most detestable fellow," Bishop Percy called him, and other adjectives that were applied to him by his contemporaries were "obstinate," "contentious," "quarrelsome," "haughty and

ignorant," "mean and grovelling," "absolutely dishonest," and "sanctimonious." The best that Johnson himself could say of him was: "As to Sir John, why really I believe him to be an honest man at the bottom; but to be sure, he is penurious, and he is mean, and it must be owned he has a degree of brutality and a tendency to savageness that cannot be easily defended." Hawkins was so penurious that, at a later date, he refused to pay his share of the reckoning at the Literary Club, on the ground that he never ate supper—conduct that wrung from Johnson the immortal sentence: "Sir John, Sir, is a very unclubbable man."

One of the most unintentionally amusing pages in Hawkins's "Life of Johnson" is that in which this dry unclubbable sanctimonious lawyer relates how Johnson once compelled him to sit up all night at a party at the Devil Tavern near Temple Bar to celebrate the appearance of Mrs. Lennox's first book. There were about

twenty guests present, and the supper included "a magnificent apple-pie" by Johnson's express orders. Johnson placed a crown of laurel on Mrs. Lennox's brows, and the night passed in talk accompanied by lemonade, tea and coffee. About five in the morning, Hawkins declares, "Johnson's face shone with meridian splendour, though his drink had only been lemonade," while most of the other guests could scarcely keep awake. Hawkins himself was sleepy, unhappy, and suffering from tooth-ache, and, as he had never sat up in his life before, a party that began at eight in the evening and did not break up till eight the next morning filled him with increasing horror. "I well remember," he declares, "at the instant of my going out of the tavern-door, the sensation of shame that affected me, occasioned not by reflection on anything evil that had passed in the course of the night's entertainment, but on the resemblance it bore to a debauch." Much may be forgiven Hawkins for the

self-revelation of that last sentence. There, if anywhere, you have his perfect portrait.

That Hawkins had some of the admirable virtues, however, is clear both from the way in which his daughter writes of him and from the long continuance of his friendship with Johnson, one of whose executors he ultimately became. He was in a measure a pretentious pedant, but he had also a genuine passion for literature and music. If Boswell disparages him, this is partly due to the jealousy of a rival biographer and to the fact that Hawkins referred to him in the "Life" as "Mr. James Boswell, a native of Scotland." In revenge for this slight, Boswell spoke of "Mr. John Hawkins, an attorney," in his account of the members of the Ivy Lane Club. It cannot be maintained that Sir John had many of the amiable virtues or any of the amiable vices, but, at least, he was a sufficiently tolerable human being to win the qualified friendship of Johnson and the qualified praise of Horace Walpole.

Even before the foundation of the Ivy Lane Club, Johnson had formed another of his permanent friendships, with that strange, silent creature, Robert Levett, who began his career as a waiter in Paris and who afterwards became a doctor in London with a practice chiefly among poor people. Levett was an elderly man when, after the death of Mrs. Johnson, he became a member of Johnson's household. He was a thin, wrinkled, uncouth, middle-sized oddity whose appearance and dress were such that it is said that he might have been taken for an alchemist. Johnson himself said of him that his appearance and manners were such that he disgusted the rich and terrified the poor. He was an unfortunate creature who, nearing the age of sixty, had married a prostitute under the impression (according to Hawkins) that she was an heiress, but was soon afterwards deserted by her, only to learn that she was being tried at the Old Bailey for picking pockets. His chief duty in Johnson's household seems to have

been to make tea for his benefactor during the morning, and sit silently with him through breakfast, after which he would go out to work among his patients, many of whom paid him not in money, but in liquor. Johnson said of Dr. Levett that he was the only man who had ever got drunk from motives of prudence, since he knew that if he did not take the gin and brandy that were offered to him, he would get nothing. Boswell, in the early days of his discipleship, expressed surprise to find Johnson harbouring a man of whom he had heard a very bad character. "He is poor and honest," Goldsmith replied, "which is recommendation enough to Johnson. He is now become miserable, and that insures the protection of Johnson." By all accounts, Levett had no vices but "an occasional departure from sobriety." He was faithful, grateful, and affectionate, and that he was no fool is likely, for Johnson trusted him as his own physician. Johnson even declared, what every one

else denied, that Levett was "ready at conversation." He must have been a very old man when he died two years before Dr. Johnson. He survives attractively in Johnson's memorial verses, not least so in the lines :

His virtues walked their narrow round,  
Nor made a pause, nor left a void ;  
And sure the Eternal master found  
His single talent well employed.

The phrase, "a genius for friendship," is in common use nowadays, and is often applied on slight enough occasion. But, if it could ever be used justly of any mortal being, it was surely of Johnson. He said himself that a man should keep his friendship in constant repair, and he had the unusual capacity for making more friends after middle life than before it.

There is nothing more charming in his biography than the record of his friendship with Bennet Langton and Topham Beauclerk, who sought his acquaintance while they were still youths at Oxford. Langton



was a rich, well-bred, handsome, languid young man, six feet in height, lean, stooping, and with the sweetest of smiles. Miss Hawkins has left us a picture of him as he sat talking, with a gold-mounted snuff-box in his hand, and with one of his long legs curled round the other. We have another grotesque picture of him as a stork standing on one leg. In temperament he was one who preferred the life of contemplation to the life of action, and it is possible that he occasionally enjoyed posing. Or his picturesque languor may have been entirely genuine. "He told me," said Miss Hawkins, "that at two o'clock every day he felt such a failure of his intellectual powers as to disperse all his ideas, but regained them after taking a little nourishment. He often quitted the dinner-table fasting, but unconscious of the fact, such were the unceasing flow of his conversation and the calls made on him by other guests." Indolent though he was, he had almost every virtue and every

charm that attract the love of good and even of middling good men. He was, perhaps, the friend whom Johnson loved most warmly of all. "The earth," Johnson declared vehemently, "does not bare a worthier man than Bennet Langton." "I know not," he said on another occasion, "who will go to Heaven if Langton does not. Sir, I could almost say, 'Sit anima mea cum Langtono.'" Langton, indeed, attracted Johnson both through his social graces and through his gentle moral nature. We see him amusingly as a moralist in his presentation of a copy of that "very pious book," "The Government of the Tongue," to Boswell on one occasion, after Boswell had been indulging in mischievous gossip. "He gave me," says Boswell, "the book, and hoped I would read that treatise; but said no more."

That, if Langton was given to preaching, he had frequently good cause to preach to his friend, Topham Beauclerk, seems likely. Johnson was at first puzzled by the friend-

ship that existed between such a worthy young man as Langton and such a scapegrace as Beauclerk, but, though he occasionally flung a sermon at Beauclerk's head, he found his spell quite as irresistible as Langton had done. Beauclerk lived the life of pleasure, was a gambler and a "gay dog," but he was extremely good-natured, had a passionate love of literature, and could talk. He was the great-grandson of Charles II and Nell Gwynn, and it is said that he inherited something of his royal ancestor's personal appearance; it is clear that he also inherited much of his charm as well as of his self-indulgence. No one else, says Boswell, could take such liberties with Johnson. There were occasions, however, on which even Beauclerk went too far, so that Johnson cried: "You never open your mouth but with intention to give pain; you have often given me pain, not from the power of what you said but from seeing your intention." But Johnson's very rebukes were mingled with admiration.

"Thy body," he declared, "is all vice, and thy mind all virtue."

Johnson, with his love of giving nicknames to his friends, called Langton "Lanky" and Beauclerk "Beau," as he called Boswell "Bozzy"—"a puerile attempt at playfulness," says Miss Hawkins acidly, "which did not sit well on an aged philosopher." It is important to remember, however, that when Johnson first made friends with these two youths who were scarcely more than schoolboys he was by no means an aged philosopher, but a man of forty-four and not yet the king of men of letters. It was not an aged philosopher whom the young men knocked up at three o'clock in the morning and invited to join them in a ramble on that famous occasion when he came to the door "with his little black wig on the top of his head instead of a night-cap, and a poker in his hand," only to exclaim delightedly on recognising them, "What, is it you, you dogs? I'll have a frisk with you." Yet even in a

middle-aged man the rejection of sleep for the pleasures of company, the sally into the streets, the visit to Covent Garden Market, and the attempt to help the surprised greengrocers with their hampers, the row in the boat down the Thames to Billingsgate, and (after Langton had gone) the perseverance in "dissipation" during the rest of the day with Beauclerk, are evidence of an unusual capacity for enjoying the zest of life and for entering into the enjoyments of other people as into a game. "I heard of your frolic t'other night," said Garrick on meeting Johnson afterwards; "you'll be in the 'Chronicle.'" Johnson waited till Garrick was gone before uttering his retort. Then he cried with Falstaffian triumph: "*He* durst not do such a thing: His *wife* would not *let* him!"

It is remarkable, when one considers the part Langton and Beauclerk played in Johnson's life and the reputation they enjoyed for conversational brilliance, that Boswell gives them such small speaking

parts in the long dialogue that was the life of Johnson. Professor Tinker imputes Boswell's neglect of the witticisms of Beauclerk and others to his indifference to the fireworks of conversation and to his preference for wit that was mingled with wisdom. This may be partly true. Boswell was not primarily a collector of *bons mots*, but a painter of character through situation and dialogue. Johnson was his theme, and the conversation of even the wittiest men was irrelevant except in so far as it drew Johnson out and gave him an opportunity for an exhibition of tolerance, oracular utterance, or triumph.

If Boswell gave Beauclerk only a very small part to play in the "Life," it was not because he disliked him, as did Mrs. Thrale, who wrote: "Oh Lord! how I did hate that horrid Beauclerk!" Beauclerk is always permitted to appear on the stage when his appearance helps to emphasise some characteristic of the leading actor. Thus the good-humoured tolerance of John-

son is brought out in the story that, when he received his pension, the impudent youth ventured to say to him: "I hope you'll now purge and live cleanly, like a gentleman." And the irritable side of Johnson's temper is revealed in that heated argument of a later date, when Beauclerk contended that every wise man who intended to shoot himself should take two pistols in order to make sure of achieving his object. Beauclerk's droll humour unfortunately led him to produce a false argument in support of his contention. "Mr. —," he declared, "who loved buttered muffins, but durst not eat them because they disagreed with his stomach, resolved to shoot himself; and then he ate three buttered muffins for breakfast, before shooting himself, knowing that he should not be troubled with indigestion: *he* had charged two pistols; one was found lying charged upon the table by him, after he had shot himself with the other." Johnson triumphantly pointed out that this

showed the sufficiency of one pistol. But Beauclerk, maintaining that this was only because one pistol for the nonce had been effective, added sharply, "This is what you don't know, and I do." Johnson seems to have brooded for a few minutes over this piece of rudeness, for after some time he burst out: "Mr. Beauclerk, how came you to talk so petulantly to me as 'This is what you don't know, but I know?' "

"Because," said Beauclerk, like an offended child, "you began by being uncivil (which you always are)." Johnson again allowed the conversation to go on for some time before returning to the fray, but, during a discussion that arose on the violence of the Rev. Mr. Hackman's temper, he observed pointedly: "It was his business to command his temper, as my friend, Mr. Beauclerk, should have done some time ago." "I should learn of *you*, sir," retorted Beauclerk. "Sir," said Dr. Johnson, "you have given *me* opportunity enough of learning, when I have been in



*your* company. No man loves to be treated with contempt." It is a scene of childish tantrums such as we find recurring again and again in the story of the relations between Johnson and his friends. Apart from the story of the buttered muffins there is neither wit nor wisdom exhibited on either side. Boswell, however, saw that, if he was to make Johnson real, he must allow him to behave as naturally in his biography as he had behaved in life, and that petty scenes are as likely to reveal the variety of a man's nature as great ones. It is because Boswell did not shrink from exhibiting his characters in their silliness as well as in their greatness that Johnson is the most real figure in English biography. We catch Johnson as we catch Pepys, when he is off his guard, and seem to know him better almost than we know ourselves.

And his readiness to make up a quarrel is made as clear in the scene as his readiness to take and give offence. An apology from Beauclerk brought immediate peace and

was followed by a late sitting; and Boswell records that Johnson and he "dined at Beauclerk's on the Saturday se'nnight following."

There were few of Johnson's friendships that were not diversified in this fashion with an occasional squabble. Even Bishop Percy and Sir Joshua Reynolds became actors in what Parliamentary reporters call "scenes." Johnson and his friends played the game of conversation as vigorously as if it had been Rugby football. Johnson, besides, was an outspoken and penetrating critic of those he loved best, both to their faces and behind their backs. He would accept friendship on no other terms. His affection never blinded him to his friend's faults, nor, on the other hand, did his moral judgment blind him to their virtues and social graces. He might disapprove on moral grounds of Beauclerk's marriage to the divorced wife of another man, and say to Boswell, who defended it: "My dear Sir, never accustom your mind

to mingle virtue and vice. The woman's a whore, and there's an end on 't." But none the less he could dine with Beauclerk and Lady Di as cheerfully as he could dine with Whigs, whom he considered scarcely less immoral. He was content to live his own life and to let other people live theirs, provided they had the great virtue of sociability. He was not a man who could resist the spell of Beauclerk's humour, so easy in its flow and so apparently undesigned. "No man," he declared enthusiastically of Beauclerk, "ever was so free, when he was going to say a good thing, from a *look* that expressed that it was coming; or, when he said it, from a look that expressed that it had come." Johnson felt that he himself laboured when he said a good thing and that, in at least one grace of conversation, Beauclerk excelled him.

Of Johnson's other early friends and acquaintances, we may leave the most famous, Goldsmith and Sir Joshua Reynolds, to the next chapter, covering the

period when Johnson was a great man among great men, though he knew both of them before he knew Boswell. Boswell, indeed, was the last of all his close friends, except the Thrales, to make his acquaintance. Of the others, Arthur Murphy, Irish actor, dramatist, journalist, and biographer—the “dear Mur” of Johnson—is chiefly memorable as the man who brought Johnson in his “abode of wretchedness” the offer of a pension from the Government and who introduced him to the Thrales. The story of his own introduction to Johnson, however, is interesting for the light it throws both on Murphy’s easy-going character and on the illimitable good nature of Johnson. Finding himself one day on a holiday in the country and with an article to write for *The Gray’s Inn Journal*, Murphy decided, instead of being at the pains to compose an essay himself, to translate an essay that he had found in a French journal. After the publication of the essay, he was alarmed to discover that what he had

translated into English was itself a translation of one of Johnson's "Ramblers" into French. He immediately resolved to call on Johnson and offer his apologies; and, on calling at Gough Square, he found him, as he says, "all covered with soot like a chimney-sweeper, in a little room, with an intolerable and strange smell, as if he had been acting Lungs in the 'Alchemist,' making æther" (for Johnson was an enthusiastic amateur chemist). Doubts have been cast on the accuracy of some of the details of the story, but it is at least certain that Murphy's lazy theft from Johnson was the beginning of a long and close friendship between the two men. Murphy is by no means lively company as a writer, but he had a genius for winning affection, and was one of the few friends of Johnson of whom Mrs. Thrale spoke kindly. He was the only one of them who stood by her when literary London was tearing her to pieces at the time of her second marriage, which shows that, though something of a parasite,

he was not an ungrateful parasite. Rogers, who knew him in later life, spoke of him contemptuously as a man in pecuniary difficulties, who had "eaten himself out of every tavern from the other side of Temple Bar to the west end of the town," but Rogers knew him, to his cost, as a borrower. And even he pays a tribute to the native generosity of Murphy as a man who, when an actress with whom he had lived left him her entire property, refused the bequest and gave every farthing of it to her relations. It is rather curious that, though Murphy was himself a comic writer and enjoyed the comic side of Johnson's character, declaring to Mrs. Thrale that he was "incomparable at buffoonery," he has himself so signally failed in his reminiscences to write amusingly of Johnson. He did, however, preserve one or two pieces of dialogue that have enriched Johnsonian biography, as in the story of the evening on which he went with Johnson to see Garrick in "King Lear" and sat, not

altogether silently, "near the side of the scenes." Garrick was naturally offended by the noise made by their conversation. When he came off the stage, he said: "You two talk so loud you destroy all my feelings." "Prithee," replied Johnson—and it was a gross reply, even as a jest—"do not talk of feelings. Punch has no feelings." On the whole, however, Murphy aims at generalising about Johnson rather than at exhibiting him, as Boswell does, on particular occasion after particular occasion. To read Murphy's "Essay on Johnson's Life and Genius," which was prefixed to his edition of the collected works, is to realise how consummate an artist was James Boswell. As a writer, Murphy has by now almost ceased to exist except in the reference library. His translation of Tacitus, it is true, has been included in Everyman's Library, but to the reading world at large he is now no more than a vague figure and a name.

Some people, as they read the life of

Johnson, may find themselves wondering at times whether he had ever any real friends at all—whether, when all is said, his eminent characteristic was, not a genius for friendship, but a genius for acquaintanceship. Certainly, it is difficult to believe that he ever loved any of his friends as Lamb loved Coleridge. Many of his friends are rather like boon-companions, with conversation taking the place of wine as the bond of union. At the same time, if a boon-companionship becomes permanent, it is unreasonable to deny it the name of friendship. Johnson himself was, in his appreciative moods, so exuberant in praise of his acquaintances that we probably think of them as having been more intimate friends than they really were. What, for example, could be more exuberant than his tribute to Dr. Burney: "My heart goes out to meet him. I much question if there is in the world such another man as Dr. Burney"? Yet in spite of this tribute, amiable a figure though Dr. Burney is, and



vivaciously though his family lives in Fanny Burney's diary, it is difficult to imagine any great intimacy between him and Johnson. When we first meet him, it is as an unknown admirer in the days of "The Rambler," who wrote to express his admiration of the author and to inquire how he could order six copies of the forthcoming "Dictionary" for himself and his friends. Johnson, though indolent, was polite, and the letter in which he replied to Burney led to the addition of yet another satellite to the shining planet that we know as Dr. Johnson. Two years later, when the "Dictionary" had appeared, and Burney had duly commended it, we find Johnson writing gratefully: "Your praise was very welcome, not only because I believe it was sincere, but because praise has been very scarce. Yours is the only letter of goodwill I have received." On this foundation of mutual gratitude, Burney was a welcome guest when, a year afterwards, he called at Gough Square to drink tea with Johnson.

and Mrs. Williams. Boswell quotes Burney's account of that memorable visit, during which Johnson took him up to his "garret"—or, rather, study—where he found "about five or six Greek folios, a deal writing-desk, and a chair and a half." Johnson, according to Burney, gave his guest the chair, and "tottered himself on one with only three legs and one arm." Such are the trifles that endear human beings to us that we take a peculiar pleasure in the picture of Johnson balancing himself uneasily on his three-legged ruin. Miss Reynolds has also left us an account of the chair, on rising from which Johnson "never forgot its defect, but would either hold it in his hand or place it with great composure against some support, taking no notice of its imperfection to his visitor," and, though one ought to like a human being better than a chair, we end by being as much interested in the chair as in either Miss Reynolds or Dr. Burney.

Burney himself seems to have played a

small enough part in Johnson's life till, having settled in London, he was thrown into his company again by the Thrales, when he used to sit up talking with him at Streatham "as long as the fire and candles lasted, and much longer than the patience of the servants subsisted." He is memorable, too, as we read of the days in which the fashionable world flocked to his house in St. Martin's Street, as the man to whom Johnson confessed that he had no passion for clean linen and of whom he inquired, during a discussion on music: "And, pray, sir, who is Bach? Is he a piper?" Burney as a composer and as the historian of music has a page devoted to him in the "*Encyclopædia Britannica*," but in the general memory he survives chiefly as the father of Fanny Burney and as the man who knew Dr. Johnson and described his chair.

As for Baretti, he too survives mainly as a satellite of Johnson. After Hawkins, he was perhaps the most generally disliked of

Johnson's friends. Johnson, who had known him early and was grateful to him for his help with the "Dictionary," might address him affectionately as "my Baretti," but Goldsmith, Boswell, and Mrs. Thrale have all testified against him as an odious person. Goldsmith, according to Tom Davies, "considered him as a violent, overbearing foreigner." Boswell, we are told, was his mortal foe. The Rev. Thomas Campbell described him as "a sort of literary toad-eater to Johnson." As for Mrs. Thrale, she portrays him as a brilliant, brutal, treacherous liar and self-seeker. She admits that he had all the virtues of a companion except loyalty. He "could be sublime with Johnson or blackguard with the groom." He could talk, sing, flatter, and was a born manager, as he showed when the Thrales employed him on their travels. But his very virtues were the virtues of a liar. His versatile tongue might be useful for wheedling an innkeeper, but it was also capable of repeating to an English clergy-

man the story of Dives and Lazarus as "the subject of a poem he once had composed in the Milanese dialect, expecting great credit for his powers of invention."

It is true that, when Barette stabbed a man to death in the Haymarket and was charged with murder at the Old Bailey, Johnson, Burke, and Reynolds all appeared as witnesses to testify to his excellent and peaceable character. Johnson, who declared that he had got to know him in 1753 or 1754, described him as a studious and diligent man—"a man that I never knew to be otherwise than peaceable, and a man that I take to be rather timorous." It is improbable that Johnson would have borne the same testimony in later life. It is clear that, when he had persuaded the Thrales to take Barette into their household as a tutor, his conscience smote him for the pandemonium that followed. Prosperous surroundings seem to have turned Barette's head, and, instead of being timorous, he became insolent. Mrs. Thrale accused him

of inciting her children and servants to defy her authority. He made himself master of her house, and "every soul that visited at our house while he was master of it went away abhorring it." Johnson himself would scarcely have continued his friendship with him if he had not pitied him as a poor author, living in exile. "Johnson," says Mrs. Thrale, "used to oppose and battle him, but never with his own consent. The moment he was cool, he would always condemn himself for exerting his superiority over a man who was his friend, a foreigner, and poor." He besought Mrs. Thrale not to quarrel with her tutor, who meant only to be frank, manly, and independent. "To be frank," wrote Johnson, "he thinks is to be cynical, and to be independent is to be rude. Forgive him, dearest lady, the rather because of his misbehaviour, I am afraid, he learned part of me." Great as were Johnson's powers of tolerance, however, there must have been occasions on which he almost wished, as Boswell is said to

have wished, that Baretti had been hanged after the Haymarket affair. That his feelings towards Baretti were, except at the beginning of the acquaintance, never of the warmest is suggested by his assertion on the eve of the trial, that, if a friend of his were hanged, he would eat his dinner as if his friend were eating with him. "Why," he said, "there's Baretti, who is to be tried for his life to-morrow. Friends have risen up for him on every side; yet, if he should be hanged, none of them will eat a slice of plum pudding the less." This is often quoted as proof of the common sense of Dr. Johnson: it is proof, rather, that it was possible to win Johnson's friendship without winning his heart.

Baretti, however, is one of the few friends between whom and Johnson a lasting coldness seems to have arisen. Johnson never allowed his exasperation to incite him to such actions as that of the angry American lady who poured boiling water on Baretti out of a tea-urn. But he became

increasingly impatient of the man's boastfulness and lying. Of Baretti's foolish boastfulness we have an example in the story of his bringing out a pocket-knife at the Thrales' during desert and, while using it, proclaiming that this was the knife with which he had killed the man in the Haymarket. Of his luxurious gift for lying we have evidence in the story he told Mrs. Thrale that Johnson once kept sixteen cats in his room and that they scratched his legs so terribly that he had to wear mercurial plasters for some time afterwards. Miss Reynolds suggests that the final breach with Baretti came as a result of his boasting to Johnson that he had beaten Omai, a South Sea Islander with whom he played chess at Sir Joshua's, when the reverse was known to be true. "Do you think," said Baretti, on Johnson's contradicting him, "that I should be beaten at Chess by a savage?" "I know you were," declared Johnson. Baretti repeated the lie, whereupon Johnson rose from his seat,



and cried "I'll hear no more," in such a violent rage that Baretti "in a fright flew out of the house." That may have been the last meeting that ever took place between the author of the most famous of English Dictionaries and the author of an English and Italian Dictionary that has retained its reputation till the present time. Like so many things in Johnson's life, it is like a scene from comic drama, and at the same time, trifling though it is, it is a scene that reveals and emphasises the character of the chief person of the play.

---

*Reynolds, Goldsmith, Burke and the Years  
of the Dictatorship*

---



---

*Chapter V Reynolds, Goldsmith, Burke and the  
Years of the Dictatorship*

---

THE name of Dr. Johnson immediately conjures up a number of pictures in which he is the central figure. The odd thing is that, though in these pictures we see him at many tables, we seldom see him at his own. Boswell had known him for ten years before he was invited to dine at his house; and he declares that he had never heard of any of Johnson's friends having been entertained at his table. "I supposed," he writes, "we should scarcely have knives and forks, and only some strange, uncouth, ill-drest dish;" and he was astonished to find on the table "a very good soup, a boiled leg of lamb and spinach, a veal pie, and a rice pudding." When we picture Johnson as a host, it is as a host dispensing tea. In the morning—or

as near the morning as he was out of bed—he held a levée of his friends and of learned ladies, and Murphy tells us that “his house was filled with a constant succession of visitors till four or five in the evening,” the tea flowing as incessantly as the talk.

We think of Johnson, however, less as a host in his own house than as a frequenter of taverns and of other people's houses. Water-drinker though he was through a great part of his life, he is almost as closely associated with the Mitre in our imagination as is Falstaff with the Boar's Head. “No, Sir,” he declared, “there is nothing which has yet been contrived by man by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn.” It was at the Turk's Head tavern, in Gerrard Street, that the weekly suppers of the Club took place during the first years of its existence. Johnson was fifty-five years old when the meetings of the Club began, and, though he lost some of his enthusiasm for it when Whigs and strangers became too numerous among its

members, we find him dining there with Boswell even in the year of his death. Such was his passion for the tavern, indeed, that, a year before his death, at the age of seventy-four he instituted another club, at the Essex Head in Essex Street—"a six-penny club at an ale-house," so Hawkins maliciously described it, where "strangers, under restriction, for threepence each night might three nights in a week hear him talk and partake of his conversation." Johnson himself defined a "club" in the "Dictionary" as "an assembly of good fellows, meeting under certain conditions," and few men have remained good fellows till so late an age under so great a burden of suffering.

His genius, however, shone scarcely less brightly in his friends' houses than in the tavern. His unpredictable moods and manners made him at times an awful guest, but, wherever he went, he was the guest of the occasion. And there was no house at which he was more welcome than that of Sir Joshua Reynolds in what is now Leicester

Square. Reynolds, who was about fourteen years younger than Johnson, had been an admirer of his genius ever since as a young man he had taken up "The Life of Savage," and, beginning to read it, "standing with his arm leaning against a chimney-piece," had read on till the end, by which time his arm had become "totally benumbed." Some years later, the two men met at the house of Admiral Cotterell's daughters. The ladies were lamenting the death of a friend to whom they professed great feelings of obligation. "You have, however," Reynolds consoled them, "the comfort of being relieved from a burden of gratitude"; and, though his hostesses were shocked, Johnson was delighted with the philosophy of the remark, and went home with Reynolds to supper. Thus began one of the many friendships that ended only with Johnson's death. It was shortly after this that, being at a party in the same house and fuming under the suspicion that they were being neglected because the Duchess

of Argyll was present, Johnson addressed Reynolds in a loud voice, asking "How much do you think you and I could get in a week, if we were to *work as hard* as we could?" Neither of these anecdotes reflects much credit on the tact of the speaker. Yet, however untrustworthy were Johnson's manners, Reynolds was undoubtedly one of the most tactful as well as one of the most amiable men of the eighteenth century. "Sir Joshua Reynolds, Sir," said Johnson, "is the most invulnerable man I know; the man with whom if you should quarrel, you would find the most difficulty how to abuse;" and if Sir Joshua was invulnerable, it was because he possessed an uncommon share of the virtues in an uncommonly tactful form. There are those who suspect him of an almost professional blandness, and who cannot reconcile such calm weather of good fortune and good manners with warmth of heart. They suspect even the humanity of a man who could in his old age be described by Boswell as "he who



used to be looked upon as perhaps the most happy man in the world." That Reynolds was no frigid figure of worldly ambition and success, however, is shown by the way in which he befriended Goldsmith at a time when Goldsmith was regarded as a "mere literary drudge," and by the warmth of his friendship with Johnson. His house in Leicester Fields, indeed, radiated kindness. There was something like a universal welcome to those five-o'clock dinners at which there were often more guests than knives and forks, and at which statesmen, lawyers, churchmen, actors, painters, and men of letters scrambled for their food and drink in the hilarious spirit of "devil take the hindmost." Few men have so mingled the man of the world with the Bohemian. It is impossible to be in two minds about the charm of a man of whom, when he had left the room one day, Johnson said: "There goes a man not to be spoiled by prosperity."

There is something particularly appro-

priate in Boswell's dedication of the "Life" to Sir Joshua, for, after the "Life" itself, nothing has made Johnson more real to us than Reynolds's portraits. The veracity of the portraits was recognised by Johnson himself. Fanny Burney describes him seeing before an engraving of one of them, and then, with a half-laugh, calling out: "Ah ha! Sam Johnson, I see thee! and an ugly dog thou art!" One of Reynolds's portraits, however, displeased Johnson, not because it misrepresented him, but because, by making him put his pen close to his eye, it over-emphasised his short-sightedness. Mrs. Thrale pointed out that Reynolds had been as frank in a portrait of himself in which, by representing himself holding his ear in his hand, he had drawn attention to his deafness. "He may paint himself as deaf if he chooses," replied Johnson, "but I will not be *blinking Sam*."

All Johnson's friendships were based on mutual candour, however, and his friendship with Reynolds, begun in candour, could not

be destroyed by the candour of Reynolds's portrait. Candour, indeed, was a kind of game among the men of that circle, and, though it was tempered by flattery, and though every one at times resented the candour of his neighbour, it produced the happiest effects in conversation. Because of it, there was always the possibility of a squall in the smoothest waters. We have an example of this in Johnson's famous quarrel with Sir Joshua. There was no subject on which Johnson the water-drinker took more pleasure in conversing than on wine, yet, in the midst of a discussion on wine at General Paoli's one evening, he suddenly burst out to Sir Joshua: "I won't argue any more with you, Sir. You are too far gone." "I should have thought so, indeed, Sir," Reynolds replied indignantly, "had I made such a speech as you have now done." Boswell, who happened to be drinking water that evening on Johnson's recommendation, and who saw that Reynolds was perfectly sober, says that he thinks Johnson was

“blushing” when he replied apologetically : “Nay, don’t be angry, I did not mean to offend you.” Breezes of this kind must have been common enough in the intercourse between Johnson and Reynolds. One day, at Richard Cumberland’s, when Johnson asked for another cup of tea, Reynolds reminded him that he had already had eleven cups. “Sir,” said Johnson, “I did not count your glasses of wine. Why should you number up my cups of tea?” Then, suddenly beginning to laugh, he added : “Sir, I should have released the lady from any further trouble if it had not been for your remark ; but you have reminded me that I want one of the dozen, and I must now request Miss Cumberland to round up my number.” It must be admitted that Johnson, having become a water-drinker, was occasionally inclined to be suspiciously censorious of the bibulous habits of his friends. We find him writing to Boswell : “Reynolds has taken too much to strong liquor, and seems to delight

in his new character." Boswell declares, that this was a "fanciful assumption," and probably it was, but no doubt Reynolds was convivial in the fashion of his time. "I swim with the great stream of life," he once said, and the great stream of life at that time contained a high percentage of alcohol. Johnson himself, whom the strongest potations as a rule could cheer but not inebriate—he drank thirty-six glasses of port at a sitting during a visit to Oxford with a lump of sugar in every glass and seemed none the worse for it—is said once in his drinking days to have been overcome by liquor in Reynolds's company. After the third bottle his speech was so much affected that "he was unable to articulate a hard word which occurred in the course of his conversation." He made three attempts at the word, and failed. At last he succeeded in pronouncing it, whereupon he wisely said: "Well, I think it is now time to go to bed."

Johnson's affection for Reynolds was

rooted in conviviality rather than in artistic sympathy. Johnson was as indifferent to painting as he was to music. He told Mrs. Thrale that he could "sit very quietly in a room hung round with the works of the greatest masters, and never feel the slightest disposition to turn them, if their backs were outermost, unless it might be for the sake of telling Sir Joshua that he *had* turned them." Of Reynolds he said on another occasion: "I never look at his pictures, so he won't read my writings." Yet no two men of genius could have been happier in each other's company. Reynolds's easy-going disposition, so easy-going that he even allowed the sight-seeing Boswell to take him to see a hanging, was of a kind with which Johnson found it easy to live in charity.

Johnson is always delightful when on his travels, but never more so than on his journey with Reynolds into Devonshire in 1762. Every one knows the story how, on arriving at Plymouth and finding the new dockyard

town petitioning the old town for a share in its water-supply, he immediately took sides in the quarrel, denounced the dockers as upstarts and aliens, and cried vehemently : " No, no, I am against the dockers ; I am a Plymouth man. Rogues ! let them die of thirst. They shall not have a drop ! " Seldom did he enjoy higher spirits than during that visit to the west. It was in the course of it that he gave his incomparable reply to the lady who asked him how he came to define " pastern " in his Dictionary as the " knee of a horse " : " Ignorance, madam, pure ignorance." It was characteristic of him, by the way, that he did not correct this and a similar error in later editions of the Dictionary. " No," he said laughingly to Reynolds, " they made so much of it that I would not flatter them by altering it ! "

The friendship between Johnson and Reynolds remained, as has been said, unbroken. Unlike Boswell, Reynolds was with him near the end. Johnson sent for Sir

Joshua some days before he died, and begged him to grant three requests to a dying friend. Reynolds gave his promise, whereupon Johnson besought him to remit a debt of thirty pounds, as he wished to leave the money to a distressed family, never to paint on a Sunday, and to read the Bible whenever he had the opportunity. It is said that Reynolds kept all three promises for a time, but that he afterwards took to working on Sunday again. Johnson, we may have been sure, if his spirit had returned to earth, would have been the first to make allowances for the lapse.

Oliver Goldsmith, one of the best-loved figures in literary history, was still almost an unknown man when he was admitted into the friendship of Reynolds and Johnson. Johnson was above fifty years old at the time of their first meeting and was at the height of his fame, with most of his great works already published: Goldsmith was a little more than thirty, and had not yet published a book under his own name.



Hawkins was honestly puzzled by the election of this unattractive-looking hack among the first nine members of the Club, and to a conventional eye there cannot have been much in Goldsmith's appearance to suggest the possession either of social or of literary genius. Goldsmith, indeed, was so ugly, with his pock-marked face and coarse features, that a lady, on being asked at a party to give the toast of the ugliest man she knew, named Goldsmith, at which another lady leaned across the table, shook her by the hand, and desired her better acquaintance. "Thus," said Johnson, who was present, "the ancients, on the commencement of their friendship, used to sacrifice a beast between them." Miss Reynolds declares that from top to toe Goldsmith "impressed every one at first sight with an idea of his being a low mechanic—particularly, I believe, a journey-man tailor." Nor had he yet begun to adorn himself with those fopperies of dress that afterwards made him at once so conspicuous

and so pathetic a figure. He was slovenly to a point that shocked even Johnson. Percy tells an amusing story of calling on Johnson to take him on his first visit to Wine-Office Court to sup with Goldsmith. He was astonished to find Johnson neatly dressed for the occasion in a new suit of clothes and with a new wig nicely powdered, and altogether unlike his usual self. He could not help inquiring the cause of this "singular transformation." "Why, Sir," said Johnson, "I hear that Goldsmith, who is a very great sloven, justifies his disregard of cleanliness and decency by quoting my practice; and I am desirous this night to show him a better example."

And, if we are to believe some of his contemporaries, Goldsmith was as deficient in the graces of conversation as of costume. Garrick said that he "wrote like an angel and talked like poor Poll." Horace Walpole called him "silly Dr. Goldsmith" and "an inspired idiot." Boswell, who did not like him, was generous enough to deny that

he "was a mere fool in conversation," but described him as *un étourdi*, eager to be conspicuous, vain and envious. And Johnson was as severe as any one else on Goldsmith as a companion. "He was not a social man," he declared after Goldsmith's death; "he never exchanged mind with you." "He was," he told Boswell on another occasion, "not an agreeable companion, for he talked always for fame." Such a dolt did Goldsmith seem to some members of the Club that, when "The Traveller" came out, Chamier (afterwards Under-Secretary at the War Office), who had been talking with him for some time, observed ironically to Johnson: "Well, I do believe he wrote the poem himself, and, let me tell you, that is believing a great deal."

I confess I find it difficult to accept these unflattering accounts of Goldsmith as a conversationalist. The truth is, I think, that he was to the last something of an alien in the Johnson circle and had a mind never quite adapted to the rhythm of its speech.

He and Johnson were great acquaintances rather than great friends. Miss Reynolds was of the opinion that Johnson felt more kindly towards Goldsmith than Goldsmith felt towards Johnson; but there was resentment mingled with the affection and admiration of each of them. Goldsmith's sensitive vanity was continually wounded by the general conspiracy to concede to Johnson the rights of a dictator in mixed conversation. "Sir," said he one evening to Boswell, who had been talking of Johnson as a man entitled to the honour of unquestionable superiority, "you are for making a monarchy of what should be a republic." That remark alone is evidence of some talent for conversation, as is Goldsmith's answer to a lady who complained of his silence in company: "Madam, I have but ninepence in ready money, but I can draw for a thousand pounds." Boswell himself admitted that Goldsmith "was often very fortunate in his witty contests," even when he entered the lists

with Johnson; and he gave as an example the conversation on fables, in which Goldsmith said that he thought he could write a good fable, and that the important thing was to make the animals talk in character. "For instance," he said, "the fable of the little fishes, who saw birds flying over their heads, and, envying them, petitioned Jupiter to be changed into birds. The skill consists in making them talk like little fishes." Noticing that Johnson was shaking his sides and laughing at him, he observed: "Why, Dr. Johnson, this is not so easy as you seem to think; for if you were to make little fishes talk, they would talk like whales."

Even the evidence of the witnesses against Goldsmith, indeed, if we examine it, has a way of turning out to be evidence in his favour. Mrs. Thrale, for instance, quotes as an example of his imbecility the remark: "I would advise every young fellow setting out in life to love gravy," imagining that he spoke quite seriously, because he said that he "had formerly seen a glutton's

eldest nephew disinherited because he never could persuade him to say he liked gravy." In this post-Gilbertian age it is obvious even to the humourless that Goldsmith was making a joke. He probably made the mistake, however, of joking with a perfectly serious face. His serious face stood him in as bad stead when he went on a visit to France in 1770 with Mrs. Hornack and her daughters, one of whom was the "Jessamy Bride." Goldsmith, it is said, was standing in the balcony of a hotel at Lille one day, watching, along with the two beautiful sisters, a company of soldiers in the square, when, noticing the admiring glances they attracted, he withdrew from the window, observing that elsewhere he, too, could have his admirers. Here, it is as certain as anything can be, Goldsmith was making an ordinary flattering joke. Yet Boswell solemnly records the incident in the sentence: "When accompanying two beautiful young ladies with their mother on a tour in France, he was seriously angry that

more attention was paid to them than to him."

Probably, Oliver Goldsmith was much more at home, and his jests were more readily understood, in his own haunts—the whist-club at the Devil Tavern and the sing-song club at the Globe—than in the more grave and intellectual haunts frequented by Johnson and Boswell. In the Johnsonian circle he must often have felt, in the modern phrase, like a lowbrow in the company of highbrows. Those conversations described by Boswell—"The custom of eating dogs at Otaheite being mentioned" is a characteristic beginning—must have weighed on the spirits of one who wanted chiefly song and wine and laughter. Had he but lived to write his own account of Johnson and Boswell, he might have left a book second only to Boswell. Johnson himself feared him as a biographer. "The dog would write it best to be sure," he said to Mrs. Thrale, who suggested that Goldsmith would write his biography, "but his particular

malice towards me, and general disregard to truth, would make the book useless to all, and injurious to my character."

Yet, in spite of their obvious incompatibility of temper—Goldsmith, we are told, hated the prudery of Johnson's morals and used to say contemptuously that he would have made "a decent monk"—each of them had a noble admiration and even affection for the other. Goldsmith could scarcely forget that morning on which he had been arrested for his rent and dispatched a message to Johnson for assistance. Johnson sent him a guinea from bed and hurried after it, only to find that Goldsmith had "already changed my guinea, and had got a bottle of Madeira and a glass before him." He put the cork into the bottle, talked seriously to Goldsmith, and discovered that he had a work ready for the press. He looked at it, saw that it was good, hurried off with it to a bookseller, and sold it for sixty pounds. He brought back the money to Goldsmith, who paid his



rent, "not without rating his landlady in a high tone for having used him so ill." The novel that paid the rent was "The Vicar of Wakefield."

With all their incompatibilities, Goldsmith attracted Johnson and Johnson attracted Goldsmith, because each of them was fundamentally a good man as well as a good fellow. Goldsmith was feckless, a gambler, a lover of what is called low company, but he was generous, as careless of his own money as of other people's, more eager to assist friends in distress than to pay his debts, always a victim, never a man who took advantage of his fellows. There was no taint of cruelty or meanness in his nature, and he loved his neighbour as himself. But there is no need to deny that he and Johnson were frequently exasperated by each other's faults—Goldsmith by Johnson's love of domineering, and Johnson—though he confessed of himself: "Nobody at times talks more laxly than I do"—by Goldsmith's laxness of

speech and his love of showing off. And one cannot help suspecting that Boswell, the tittle-tattle, occasionally told tales that helped to set Johnson against Goldsmith. It is extremely unlikely that he showed less malice in talking about Goldsmith to Johnson than in talking about him to posterity. When he met Goldsmith for the last time—it was on the eve of the tour in Scotland—and when Goldsmith spoke grudgingly of Johnson, saying that he would be a “dead weight” for Boswell to carry, and asking in another connection: “Is he like Burke, who winds into a subject like a serpent?” Boswell, who had replied with triumphant irrelevance: “But Johnson is the Hercules who strangled serpents in his cradle,” can scarcely have had the undramatic tact to keep silent about so dramatic an interview.

The friendship of Johnson and Goldsmith was indeed, for many reasons, often a somewhat uneasy one. With all their mutual affection and admiration, they

disapproved of one another till the end. The last occasion on which they met was a dinner in the Temple at which Goldsmith was host and Johnson and Reynolds were the chief guests. Johnson, knowing of Goldsmith's indebtedness, disapproved strongly of the luxuriousness of the meal, and expressed his disapproval by sending the second course away untasted. So, at least, Goldsmith interpreted Johnson's abstinence, and he was deeply wounded. Johnson, one is sure, never realised that he had given pain. There is no hint of remorse—remorse such as Johnson always felt when he knew that he had hurt a friend's feelings—in his references to the death of Goldsmith. "He died of a fever," he wrote to Bennet Langton, "exasperated, as I believe, by the fear of distress. He had raised money and squandered it by every artifice of acquisition and folly of expense. But let not his frailties be remembered; he was a very great man." It seems too censoriously candid a reference

to a friend who had died prematurely in poverty and misery. All the frailties of Goldsmith are blotted out for most of us by the memory of those last pathetic words that he uttered. The doctor at his bedside, puzzled by the disordered condition of his pulse, asked him: "Is your mind at ease?" "No, it is not," replied Goldsmith, and never spoke again. He died in misery, and it is said—which may help to account for the misery—owing not less than two thousand pounds. "Was ever poet so trusted before?" commented Johnson in a letter giving the news to Boswell. It is a comment characteristic of Johnson, with his curious genius for preserving a clear and detached mind at the same time as the most generous of hearts. The essential generosity of his feelings towards Goldsmith both as a writer and as a man, in all the varied seasons of their friendship, appears as surely in the noble epitaph he wrote for him as in the negotiation of the sale of "The Vicar of Wakefield." Even

in printing a copy of the epitaph, however, Boswell, the rival and disparager, cannot help protesting that Goldsmith is overpraised in it. Referring to the praise of Goldsmith as a natural historian, he quotes Johnson's earlier remark on "Animated Nature": "Goldsmith, Sir, will give us a very fine book upon the subject; but, if he can distinguish a cow from a horse, that, I believe, may be the extent of this knowledge of natural history." And he is at pains to point out that Goldsmith believed that a cow sheds her horns every two years.

Edmund Burke, who was only a few months younger than Goldsmith and had been his fellow-student at Trinity College, Dublin, was also, like him, an original member of the Club when it was founded in 1763. In a certain massiveness of mind, he was Johnson's only rival in the Club, and it is generally agreed that he was an unquenchable, omniscient, and exciting talker. At the same time, posterity has to take Burke's genius at the table largely on trust.

He lives in biography as a great talker, not in his own recorded sayings, but in the praise of those who knew him and loved him. Sir Joshua Reynolds declared that in the course of an evening Burke would let fall ten good things each of which would have served a famous wit of the time to live on for a twelvemonth. Johnson said enthusiastically: "His stream of mind is perpetual," and again: "Burke, Sir, is such a man that, if you met him for the first time in a street where you were stopped by a drove of oxen, and you and he stepped aside to take shelter but for five minutes, he'd talk to you in such a manner that, when you parted, you would say: 'This is an extraordinary man.' " It is a munificent tribute, and Johnson repeated it again and again in other forms. And it cannot have been a tribute merely to the vast knowledge of a man who was said to understand every subject except music and gaming. Johnson would have been bored by a talking encyclopædia. Even as it was,

he was critical of the incessant flow of Burke's talk. "Yet he can listen," declared Boswell. "No," replied Johnson, "I cannot say he is good at that. So desirous is he to talk that, if one is speaking at this end of the table, he'll speak to somebody at the other end." It is only fair to say that there is other evidence besides Boswell's that Burke was at times a good listener as well as a good talker. There is the story, for example, of the occasion on which he and Bennet Langton were coming away together from an evening in Johnson's company. "How very great Johnson has been to-night!" said Burke enthusiastically. Langton agreed, but suggested that he would have liked to hear more of Burke's own conversation. "Oh no," replied Burke, "it is enough for me to have rung the bell to him." Burke, it is clear, had one of the supreme qualifications of a good talker—appreciation of those to whom he talked.

Johnson seems to have liked him best as a disputant, as one who could toss a subject

backwards and forwards. Burke, unlike Goldsmith, had all the weapons of debate, and could meet Johnson on equal terms in an argument on the rival merits of Homer and Virgil. A Scottish critic once expressed the wish that Boswell had had a twin who could have Boswellised Burke as James Boswellised Johnson. Burke, however, with all his vivacity, vehemence, sensibility, imagination, and generosity of temper, was scarcely a subject for a Boswell. He lacked that humour and oddity in the veins that give an individual turn to the most perverse sayings of Johnson. He is better company in his speeches and writings than in his table-talk. His jokes were for the most part lamentable. "He has wit," maintained Robertson. "No, Sir," replied Johnson, "he never succeeds there. 'Tis low; 'tis conceit. I used to say Burke never once made a good joke." Boswell was of an opposite opinion and quotes a number of Burke's puns and facetiæ, but Burke's jokes do not force us to laugh



to-day. We may take as an example the occasion on which he called Dr. Brocklesby "Dr. Rock"—the name of a well-known quack—and, on Brocklesby's objecting, offered to prove algebraically that Rock was his proper name. He did it in this fashion : "Brock—b=Rock, or Brock *less* b *makes* Rock. Q.E.D." His greatest feat as a humorist, perhaps, apart from his excellent Latin pun on Wilkes, was pulling Goldsmith's leg at Reynolds's at the Leicester Square house one evening. On his way to Reynolds's he had noticed Goldsmith standing in a crowd that was staring and shouting at some foreign women in a window. He confided to a friend his intention of playing a joke on Goldsmith, and, when Goldsmith arrived at Reynolds's, Burke pretended to treat him coldly, greatly to his consternation. Goldsmith begged to know what he had done wrong. Burke declared that he could not remain friends with a man who had behaved so monstrously in the Square. "Why," he cried, when

Goldsmith protested his bewilderment, "did you not exclaim, as you were looking up at those women, what stupid beasts the crowd must be for staring with such admiration at those painted Jezebels, when a man of your talents passed by unnoticed?" "Surely, surely, my dear friend," pleaded Goldsmith, "I did not say so?" "Nay," said Burke, "if you had not said so, how should I have known it?" "That's true," admitted Goldsmith; "I am very sorry; it was very foolish. I do recollect that something of the kind passed through my mind, but I did not think I had uttered it." Posterity, however, regards this as, on the whole, evidence of the angelic simplicity of Goldsmith.

At the same time, in spite of his second-rate jokes and occasional political encounters, Burke had the virtue of "clubbability" in a degree that won him the affection alike of Goldsmith, Johnson, and Reynolds. It is true that Hawkins, who regarded him as an Irish adventurer, had

to withdraw from the Club because of having been, no doubt honestly, offensive to him. But the Club may have felt jubilantly grateful to Burke on that account. He had no other enemies in the Johnson circle. He remained Goldsmith's friend to the end, and we know that he burst into tears on hearing of his death. He was also one of the many friends of Johnson who visited him on his deathbed. Once when he had been ill before, Johnson had, in his high complimentary fashion, expressed his horror of the notion of a visit from Burke. "That fellow," he declared, "calls forth all my powers; were I to see Burke now, it would kill me." He paid him a still more generous and less ambiguous compliment from his deathbed. "I am afraid, Sir," said Burke, who had called to see him at the same time as some others, "such a number of us may be oppressive to you." "No, Sir," replied Johnson, "it is not so; and I must be in a wretched state, indeed, when your company would not be a delight to me." Burke, we

are told, "in a tremulous voice, expressive of being very tenderly affected," muttered: "My dear Sir, you have always been good to me." Johnson, with all his grotesque unconventionality, loved to observe the grand formalities in his conversation, and there was no other man to whom he showed such consistently formal courtesy as to Edmund Burke.

As to the other men of genius who afterwards joined the Club, they were little more than lay figures while Johnson was dictating to the table. It is amusing to think of Gibbon, "with his usual sneer," denying that Johnson could make himself agreeable to ladies when he chose—"perhaps," says Boswell, "in resentment of Johnson's having talked with some disgust of his ugliness, which one would think a *philosopher* would not mind." But Gibbon was an alien in such company. Even Fox was a strangely silent member who, according to Gibbon, was "very shy of saying anything in Dr. Johnson's presence."

It may be doubted, indeed, whether any of the later members of the Club played half so important a part in the life of Johnson as his black servant, Francis Barber, or his cat Hodge, "for whom he himself used to go out and buy oysters, lest the servants, having that trouble, should take a dislike to the poor creature." If Boswell had not been so antipathetic to cats that he felt uncomfortable when he was in the same room with one of them, we should, I am sure, have heard more of Hodge. As it is, we must honour him for having, in spite of his misery in the company of cats, done his best to please Johnson by declaring that Hodge was "a fine cat." Johnson's reply was characteristic of his attitude to most of his friends, human and feline.—"Why, yes, Sir, but I have had cats whom I liked better than this"; and then, as if perceiving Hodge to be out of countenance, adding, "but he is a very fine cat, a very fine cat indeed." He never spoke so warmly of Edward Gibbon.

By a curious chance, the man who of all Johnson's friends contributed most to the comfort, if not to the happiness, of his later years was one whom it is scarcely possible to like any more warmly than we like Gibbon. Henry Thrale—"one of the most eminent brewers in England," as Boswell describes him—was rich, handsome, hospitable, and intelligent, but he had none of that extravagance of heart that attracts us to Goldsmith, Boswell, and Johnson himself. Mrs. Thrale complained bitterly that he married her only because no other woman whom he had asked to marry him would consent to live in Deadman's Place, Southwark, his home "in the purlieus of the brewery." He had, it is true, a better house at Streatham, as well as a hunting-box at Croydon and a house at Brighton, but he was emotionally attached to Southwark and the Brewery—more attached to them, it is said, than he ever was to his clever and lively wife. It was to the Southwark house that Arthur Murphy—an almost professional

introducer of celebrities to the Thrale dinner-parties—brought Johnson along with Woodhouse, the poetical shoemaker, in the beginning of 1765, having warned Mrs. Thrale “not to be surprised at his figure, dress, or behaviour”; and immediately a friendship began, as a result of which Johnson became a constant guest at the Thursday dinners. In the year after this, when Johnson was ill and haunted even more than usual by the dread of insanity, Mr. and Mrs. Thrale paid him a visit one day and found him on his knees with a clergyman, “beseeching God to continue to him the use of his understanding.” They at once carried him off with them to Streatham, and from this time onwards he began a new life as a member of the Thrale household, and had his own room assigned to him both at Streatham and at Southwark. Mrs. Thrale claims that her husband’s hospitality to Johnson saved his life and his reason, and that without it the “Lives of the Poets” would never have been written.

Certainly, it gave Johnson his first prolonged taste of the settled elegances and luxuries of life, and provided him at once with care and with comfort such as he had never before known. Here, even more than at the Club, the position of dictator was unquestioningly conceded to him. Thrale took so much delight in his company that, according to Mrs. Thrale, "he would go nowhere that he could help without him"; and it is difficult to believe that he often cut short Johnson's conversation, as Mrs. Thrale said he sometimes did, with a rude reproof such as: "There, there, now we have had enough for one lecture, Dr. Johnson; we will not be upon education any more till after dinner, if you please." Much as he admired Thrale's masterfulness in the home—"If he but holds up a finger, he is obeyed," he declared—Johnson would have found frequent restraints of this kind on talk intolerable.

At the same time, Thrale's decorous masterfulness had undoubtedly some effect



on Johnson's manners. According to Murphy, his life with the Thrales resulted in his becoming deliberately milder and more civil. He even began to dress better. Mrs. Thrale tells us that her husband could even prevail on Johnson to "change his shirt, his coat and his plate, almost before it came indispensably necessary to the comfortable feelings of his friends." Thrale told him that he must have clothes like other people's, and he obeyed. It was Thrale who persuaded him to get new silver buckles for his shoes. There was no subservience in Johnson's complacency, however. Life at the Thrales put him in a good humour and in a mood to oblige those who had surrounded him with ease and adulation. For a time he even gave up his habit of lying in bed in the morning, and boasted that he had never kept Thrale waiting for his breakfast. He seems afterwards to have returned to his old habits, for Mrs. Thrale tells us of his having tea made for him at two in the morning, rising at noon,

and "obliging her to make breakfast till the bell rung for dinner." We can measure his happiness at the Thrales', however, by the efforts he made to break with the habits of a lifetime in order to please them.

Thrale, indeed, gave him two things that he valued highly—good food and good company. "Johnson," says Mrs. Thrale, "loved his dinner exceedingly," and Thrale, if possible, loved his dinner even more excessively than Johnson. When he died, Hannah More said of him that he "had the misfortune to be born rich, and to keep too sumptuous a table, at which he indulged too freely," and it seems fairly certain that Thrale died of over-eating. When the Rev. Dr. Campbell visited Johnson at the Thrales' in 1775, he was so delighted by the food that he described it in detail in his diary. "The dinner was excellent," he wrote: "First course, soups at head and foot removed by fish and a saddle of mutton; second course, a fowl they call Galena at head, and a capon larger than some of our

Irish turkeys at foot; third course, four different sorts of ices, pineapple, grapes, raspberry and a fourth; in each remove there were, I think, fourteen dishes. The two first courses were served in massy plate." There is nothing extravagant in this for a rich man's dinner-party, but Thrale, like Johnson, loved quantity as well as quality in eating. "He who does not mind his belly," said Johnson, "will hardly mind anything else," and Thrale put this philosophy ardently into practice. He did not even vary his voracious existence, as Johnson did his, with bouts of abstinence. "Would you have me cross my genius," wrote Johnson to Mrs. Thrale, "when it leads me sometimes to voracity and sometimes to abstinence?"; and he boasted that during the week he had seen "flesh but twice, and I think fish once, the rest was pease." Not even the threat of death could have persuaded Thrale to submit to such a diet. "Dinners and company engrossed all his thoughts," says his wife,

describing his life after the apoplectic stroke of 1779; and she complains that Johnson encouraged him in his vice. Even Johnson, however, ultimately became alarmed as his friend's "natural disposition to conviviality degenerated into a preternatural desire for food." "Sir," he cried one day, when Thrale was as usual disregarding his doctor's warnings, "after the denunciation of your physicians this morning, such eating is little better than suicide." But Johnson's lectures on temperance came too late. Thrale put a stop to one of them by asking cynically when the lamprey season came in. On the day before his death he sat down to a huge dinner, talking in the happiest spirits about the party he and Mrs. Thrale were giving the day after. "He eat, however," says Mrs. Thrale, "more than enormously. Six things the day before, and eight on this day, with strong beer in such quantities! the very servants were frightened." Within twenty-four hours messages were being sent to the guests

invited to the party to say that Mr. Thrale was dead.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of him as one who was merely a pompous, respectable glutton. It has been said of him that he had no "tricks," and he had few of those idiosyncrasies that make even a fairly ordinary man seem a unique human being. Before he met his future wife, he had been described to her as a "model of perfection," and we still think of him as a model, a pattern, rather than as an original man. We might almost say of him that he was "cut out" to be a patron: he did not mingle with men of genius on intimate terms, but as a rich admirer. I do not think it is taking a cynical view of human nature to say that, if Henry Thrale had been a poor man, he would never have numbered Johnson and Reynolds among his friends, or Goldsmith, Garrick, Boswell, and the Burneys as guests at his table. The Thrales were lion-hunters, they were collectors of celebrities. At the same time, we

have to admit that they had the genius of the great collector. They were princely in their hospitality, and realised that the champagne of good conversation was a still more rare and precious thing than the champagne they so lavishly provided for their guests. ("I hope," Boswell once wrote, rejoicing in the correction of a rumour that Thrale was dead, "I shall often taste his champagne—*soberly*.")

Johnson, in his turn, was grateful without loss of independence. He called Thrale the "Master," and Mrs. Thrale "My Mistress," as though he were their courtier, but he was as much at ease in their company as in the tavern. Did he not in Fanny Burney's presence challenge Thrale to get drunk? "I wish," said he, "my Master would say to me, 'Johnson, if you will oblige me, you will call for a bottle of Toulon,' and then we will set to it, glass for glass, till it is done; and after that, I will say, 'Thrale, if you will oblige me, you will call for another bottle of Toulon,' and then we will set to it, glass for

glass, till that is done ; and by the time we should have drunk the two bottles, we should be so happy and such good friends, that we should fly into each other's arms, and both call together for the third ! ” Not that Thrale had the exuberance of a born boon-companion. “ Pray, Doctor,” said a gentleman, “ is Mr. Thrale a man of conversation, or is he only wise and silent ? ” “ Why, Sir,” replied Johnson frankly, “ his conversation does not show the minute hand, but he strikes the hour very correctly.” He contributed to the cheerfulness of his guests from his purse rather than from his wit. The best that Mrs. Thrale could say of him was that “ Mr. Thrale’s sobriety, and the decency of his conversation, being wholly free from all oaths, ribaldry, and profaneness, make him a man exceedingly comfortable to live with ; while the easiness of his temper and slowness to take offence add greatly to his value as a domestic man.” Johnson, it is true, spoke of him warmly as “ a regular scholar,” but

the strongest link between the two men, one fancies, was the generous fashion in which Thrale opened each of his houses as Liberty Hall to Johnson and his friends.

There Dr. Johnson was the Great Man seated in the most comfortable chair, and permitted to say what he liked. He was not even allowed to see that his lively young hostess, who was more than thirty years younger than himself, was occasionally as much bored by him as by her husband, and that she was writing desperately in her diary: "I am never to see a face but Mr. Johnson's." Unaware of the ups and downs of Mrs. Thrale's feelings towards him, Johnson basked in her company as in almost perpetual sunshine. He did not realise that a critical eye was upon him which noticed that he made up for his abstinence from liquor by drinking chocolate liberally and pouring large quantities of cream into it, and by eating seven or eight large peaches before breakfast and as many again after dinner, and which twinkled sarcas-



tically as he protested that "he never had quite as much as he wished of wall-fruit except once in his life, and that was when we were all together at Ombersley, the seat of my Lord Sandys." In happy unconsciousness that notes were being taken of his appetites and bad manners as well as of his wise sayings, Johnson continued to enjoy his wall-fruit like a schoolboy on a holiday in the country, and to indulge in that animal and social mirth of which he said so nobly that "the size of a man's understanding might always be justly measured by his mirth." Probably, with all his views on the essential misery of human life, Johnson enjoyed more mirth in the company of the Thrales—swimming at Brighton, riding at Croydon, travelling in France and in Wales, and laying down the law and eating and drinking at Streatham and Southwark—than in any other company he had ever known.

Boswell was of the opinion that Thrale ought to have provided for Johnson for

life in his will, and was disappointed to find that, like the other executors, he had been left only two hundred pounds. Johnson himself, after Thrale's death, showed no signs of anything but disinterested grief for the loss of a benevolent friend. "The spring of last year," he wrote to Bennet Langton in 1782, "deprived me of Thrale, a man whose eye for fifteen years had scarcely been turned upon me but with respect and tenderness; for such another friend, the general course of human things will not suffer me to hope." His "Prayers and Meditations" contain no hint that he remembered his old patron with anything but gratitude. A year and a half after the "Master's" death, when Mrs. Thrale had finally succeeded in extruding Johnson from her house, he entered in that curious and moving journal: "Sunday, went to church at Streatham. I bade the church farewell with a kiss." And he added characteristically (as Dr. Birkbeck Hill translates the Latin): "I dined at Streat-

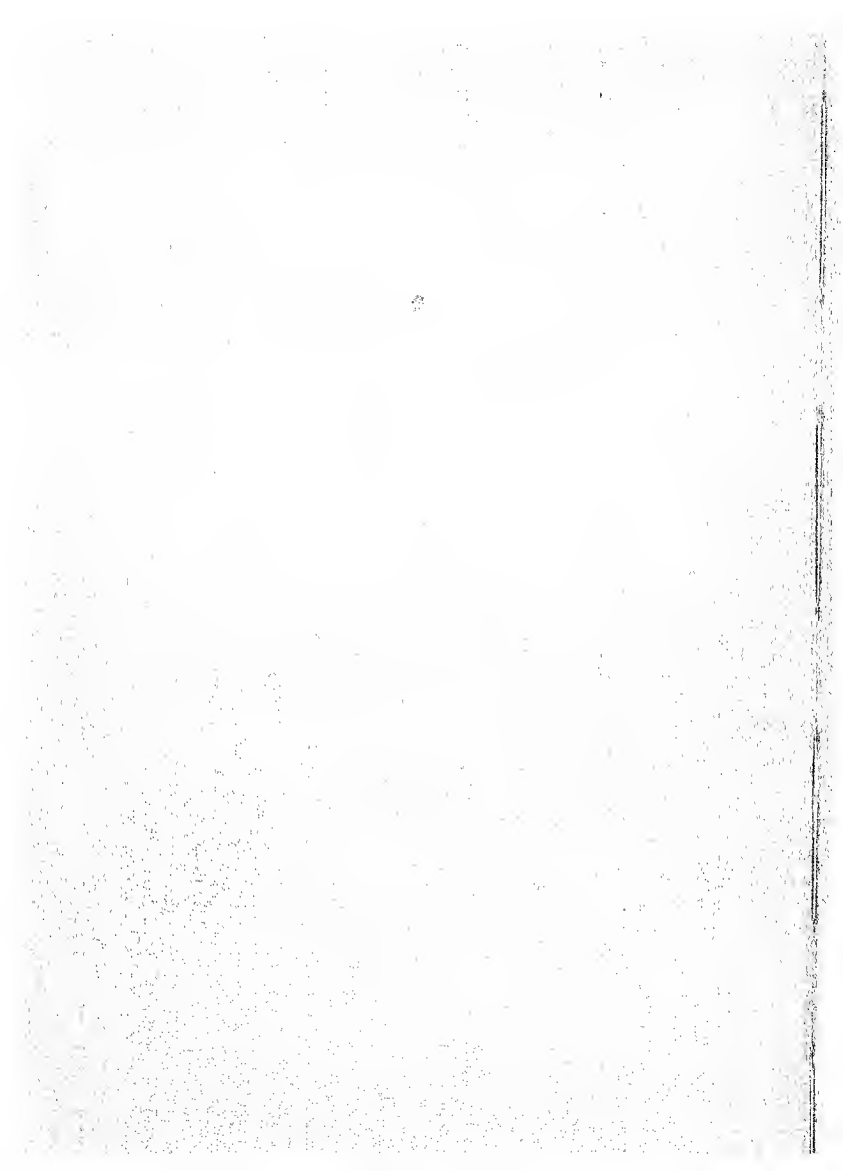
ham on a roast leg of lamb with spinach chopped fine, the stuffing of flour with raisins, a surloin of beef and a turkey poult; and after the first course figs, grapes, not very ripe owing to the bad season, with peaches—hard ones. I took my place in no joyful mood, and dined moderately that I might not at the last fall into the sin of intemperance. If I am not mistaken, the banquet of Hadon came into my mind. When shall I see Streatham again? "

Thus Johnson bade farewell to the "little Paradise" at Streatham that had so long been his second home. It is a farewell in which the spirit of Johnson and the spirit of Thrale seem to shake hands. Thrale's ghost, we feel, presided at that valedictory meal.

---

*Dr. Johnson and Women*

---



MANY people regard Dr. Johnson as essentially a man's man and declare that nine out of ten of the people who read and re-read his life and quote his sayings are men. Much the same thing is said about Falstaff: you will often hear it asserted that no woman can appreciate Falstaff. I do not know how much truth there is in these generalisations about the literary tastes of the sexes, whether it is really true that Johnson and Falstaff are outside the range of the sympathies of women or—another generalisation of the same kind—that “*Tristram Shandy*” and the “*Pickwick Papers*” appeal to men only, or almost exclusively. Most general statements about the sexes look considerably truer than they are.

If it is true, however, that Dr. Johnson,

like Falstaff, is essentially a man's man, it may be for the same reasons. Mr. J. B. Priestley, in his studies of the English comic characters, declares that women are instinctively hostile to a character such as Falstaff because he represents everything in life from which they are shut out—the tavern, the late drinking-party, and all those things that are the rivals of the domestic hearth. A woman naturally thinks, according to Mr. Priestley, that a man's place is the home; but Falstaff and Dr. Johnson in their different degrees suggest that man's place is not the home, but the club or the tavern.

At the same time, in spite of Johnson's extraordinary "clubbability," he had perhaps a more varied acquaintance with and interest in women than any other great Englishman of his time. He was both domestically and socially a woman's man as well as a man's man. He was devoted to his mother, devoted to a wife of whom most other people made fun, devoted to Mrs. Thrale and to Fanny Burney and to

the blind Mrs. Williams, to whom he gave a room in his house for so many years; he liked to go to the Green Room of Drury Lane Theatre and talk to Kitty Clive, of whom he said, "Clive, sir, is a good thing to sit by. She always understands what you say," and was friends with Miss Seward and Hannah More and the Bluestockings.

It is true that we know very little about his relations with his mother. Once when he was advocating the indulgent treatment of children, he said that "he should never have so loved his mother when a man, had she not given him coffee she could ill afford to gratify his appetite when a boy," and we get a similar impression of her affection in the story that, when as an infant he was put out to be nursed, she used to visit him every day "and used to go different ways that her assiduity might not expose her to ridicule." He was sometimes irritated by her petty-mindedness, as when, on his eating too much boiled mutton at his aunt Ford's, she told him seriously that "it would hardly ever be forgotten." We



know, however, according to Boswell, that when she died at the age of ninety, Johnson's reverential affection for her was unabated by years, as indeed he retained all his tender feelings even to the latest period of his life. "I have been told," adds Boswell, "that he regretted much his not having gone to visit his mother for several years previous to her death; but he was constantly engaged in literary labours which confined him to London, and though he had not the comfort of seeing his aged parent, he contributed liberally to her support." Johnson himself, no doubt, regarded himself as a negligent son, and it was only in the last year of his life, twenty-five years after his mother's death, that he arranged for a stone to be set up to mark his parents' grave. It must be remembered, however, that at the time of her death, Johnson was a poor man, and that, when she died, he had to sit down and write "Rasselas" in a week in order to pay the expenses of her funeral as well as a number of small debts which she had left owing.

It is unfortunate that the other Mrs. Johnson, Johnson's wife, died eleven years before Boswell's first meeting with him. Boswell can tell us nothing about her from his own experience and observation, and she lives in his book chiefly as a figure in Johnson's memories and prayers, and in a considerable amount of mainly comic gossip. She has been treated ever since for the most part in the spirit of caricature, though Mrs. Meynell, in a beautiful biographical essay, has set her on a pedestal as Johnson's "only friend." Mrs. Meynell's protest against the caricatures of Tetty, as Johnson called his wife, is justified; but, after all, Johnson himself is partly to blame if the story of his marriage has come down to us with curious touches of comedy. Tetty was not his first love. He had, we are told, from his early youth been "sensible to the influence of female charms." When a boy at Stourbridge school, he was much enamoured of Olivia Lloyd, a young Quaker, and had written verses to her. He told Boswell that the first woman with whom

he was in love was Miss Hector, who afterwards married a clergyman, and we have seen that he added—this was long after his wife's death—"If I had married her, it might have been as happy for me." "Pray, sir," asked Boswell, "do you not suppose that there are fifty women in the world with any one of whom a man may be as happy as with any one woman in particular?" "Aye, sir," declared Johnson, "fifty thousand." "Then, sir," said Boswell, "you are not of opinion with some who imagine that certain men and certain women are made for each other and that they cannot be happy if they miss their counterparts." "To be sure not, sir," replied Dr. Johnson. "I believe marriages would in general be as happy, and often more so, if they were all made by the Lord Chancellor upon a due consideration of characters and circumstances without the parties having any choice in the matter."

This does not suggest that Dr. Johnson was a romantic lover and husband, and,

indeed, there are some strangely unchivalrous passages in the story of his marriage. He was a lean, big-boned, short-sighted, forbidding-looking young man of twenty-six, when Mrs. Porter, a woman of twice his age, became his wife. It is said that on first meeting him, she had remarked to her daughter, "That is the most sensible man that I ever saw in my life." And she too, no doubt, was an unusually sensible person who had, as Boswell says, "a superiority of understanding and talents as she certainly inspired him with a more than ordinary passion." Mrs. Thrale tells us in one of her marginal notes on the "Lives of the Poets" that when Johnson approvingly quotes "a certain female critic's opinion of Gay," the female critic is his wife. Hence Johnson's marriage seems to have been a happy marriage of intelligences. It is characteristic of his piety as a son that before marrying Mrs. Porter he went home to Lichfield, to ask his mother's consent. Having obtained this, he and Mrs. Porter set out together on horseback

for Derby, where the marriage was to take place.

Johnson afterwards described to Boswell that extraordinary journey with his bride on their wedding-morning. "Sir," said he, "she had read the old romances and had got into her head that a woman of spirit should use her lover like a dog. So, sir, at first she told me that I rode too fast and she could not keep up with me; and when I rode a little slower, she passed me and complained that I lagged behind. I was not to be made the slave of caprice, and I resolved to begin as I meant to end. I therefore pushed on briskly till I was fairly out of her sight. The road lay between two hedges, so I was sure she could not miss it; and I contrived that she should soon come up with me. When she did I observed her to be in tears." "This, it must be allowed," as Boswell observes, "was a singular beginning of connubial felicity." But that Johnson and his wife did achieve connubial felicity is doubted by few even who have laughed at

Tetty. The only witnesses on the other side are the crabbed Mrs. Desmoulins, to whom Johnson was so kind, and Sir John Hawkins. Sir John was of the opinion that Johnson's fondness for his wife was assumed; and Mrs. Desmoulins's hostile comment has been put on record by Boswell. "I have," says Boswell, "been told by Mrs. Desmoulins, who before her marriage lived for some time with Mrs. Johnson at Hampstead, that she indulged in country air and nice living at an unsuitable expense, while her husband was drudging in the smoke of London, and that she by no means treated him with that complacency which is the most engaging quality in a wife."

To modern eyes neither the indulgence in country air and nice living nor the lack of complacency will seem either a crime or a bar to a reasonably happy marriage; and we may conclude from the evidence that Johnson was one of the most happily married men in literary history. He and

his wife were companions in mind as well as husband and wife; and long after her death Johnson told Boswell, "with amiable fondness," how much pleasure he had got from her praise of "The Rambler." "Mrs. Johnson," says Boswell, "in whose judgment and taste he had great confidence, said to him after a few numbers of 'The Rambler' had come out, 'I thought very well of you before; but I did not imagine you could have written anything equal to this.' " It was praise that Johnson never forgot.

Of Mrs. Johnson's personal appearance conflicting accounts have come down to us. Garrick told Thrale that she "was a little painted puppet, of no value at all, and quite disguised with affectation, full of odd airs of rural elegance," but most people who have seen her portrait will agree with Mrs. Thrale that it is "very pretty" or at least not unhandsome. Johnson, in writing her epitaph, described his wife as beautiful, and he once declared that her hair was "eminently beautiful, quite *blonde* like that

of a baby, but that she fretted about the colour, and was always desirous to dye it black, which he very judiciously hindered her from doing." This may be put down to the blind infatuation of a half-blind man; but it is a perversion of the facts to describe Johnson's devotion to his wife as infatuation. He was her candid critic as well as her lover, and, even after her death, would discuss her as frankly as he would discuss Taylor or Reynolds.

He told Mrs. Thrale how he had chided his wife on one occasion for beating the cat before the maid, because it might lead the maid to treat puss cruelly and plead her mistress's example. He also told her how he and his wife had perpetual disputes because they disagreed on the subject of tidiness. "My wife," he said, "had a particular reverence for cleanliness, and desired the praise of neatness in her dress and furniture, as many ladies do till they become troublesome to their best friends, slaves to their own besoms, and only sigh for the hour of sweeping their husbands



out of the house and dirt as useless lumber. 'A clean floor is so comfortable,' she would say sometimes by way of twitting; till at last I told her that I thought we had had talk enough about the *floor*, we would now have a touch at the ceiling." It seems to me that this makes it reasonably clear that Johnson was as free from idolatry in his love as in his friendships.

He and his wife were under no illusions about each other. It was not his wife, for example, but Molly Aston whom he described as "the loveliest creature I ever saw," and of whom he declared that the happiest period of his life was that in which he spent "one whole evening" in her company. He even reduced his wife to tears by making her jealous of Miss Aston, though, as he afterwards said: "Pretty charmer! she had no reason!" All this suggests that he was a particularly clear-sighted lover. He was a realist, not a romanticist, in his affections, and loved her none the less because he occasionally quarrelled with her as he did with every-

body else. It was not an infatuated man who told how he used to grumble at his wife about his meals till at last one day she lost patience and said, as he was about to say grace: "Nay, hold, Mr. Johnson, and do not make a farce of thanking God for a dinner which in a few minutes you will protest is uneatable." Clearly, Johnson and Mrs. Johnson were two human beings who spoke their minds to each other and loved one another in full knowledge of their several faults. She was not only his "pretty dear creature," but his dearest friend, his voluntary companion in days of such poverty and distress that they had to sell even the little silver cup, marked SAM. I., that his mother had bought as a memento of the year when she took him to London to be touched for the scrofula by Queen Anne. And, when she died, it was the loss of an incomparable companion that Johnson mourned, not the loss of a painted idol.

In the fierce and bitter letter which Johnson wrote, rejecting the patronage of

escapes into male society, he bears an uncommonly close resemblance to a hen-pecked man in a house overrun by despotic women. The most generous of mortals, he took one dependent lady after another under his wing: the blind Mrs. Williams, the acidulous Mrs. Desmoulins, and Miss Carmichael; and Boswell was amazed at the patience and kindness with which he treated his mutually jealous guests. "We surely," he says, "cannot but admire the benevolent exertions of this great and good man, especially when we consider how grievously he was afflicted with bad health and how uncomfortable his house was made by the perpetual jarring of those whom he charitably accommodated under his roof. He has sometimes suffered me to talk jocularly of his group of females and call them his seraglio." Johnson himself criticises his jarring household, mostly female, in one of his letters to Mrs. Thrale. "Williams," he tells her, "hates everybody; Levett hates Desmoulins and does not love Williams; Desmoulins hates them

both; Poll (Miss Carmichael) loves none of them." In spite of this, the odd thing is that Johnson, instead of remaining away from home as much as possible, was assiduous in his attentions to his quarrelsome guests. Miss Anna Williams, the chief of them, who is described as "the daughter of a very ingenious Welsh physician and a woman of more than ordinary talents in literature," had originally become a guest in his house in order to have an operation performed on her eyes in greater comfort than she would expect in lodgings; and afterwards, according to Boswell, she had an apartment from him for the rest of her life at all times when he had a house."

Blind and peevish though she ultimately became, she was for many years the practical head of Johnson's house. Again and again we find Johnson taking Boswell home to have tea with her, though after tea they seem usually to have gone for conversation to another room. At a time when she was not living under his roof,

but had lodgings in Bolt Court, Johnson was careful to go and drink tea with her every night before he went home, however late it might be, and Mrs. Williams, it is said, always sat up for him. Boswell suggests that Johnson's habit of drinking late tea with Mrs. Williams was a proof, not of his regard for her, but "of his own unwillingness to go into solitude before that unreasonable hour at which he had habituated himself to expect the oblivion of repose." Boswell, however, was probably a little jealous of Mrs. Williams, as he was jealous of Goldsmith on that night on which he himself was left out in the cold and Goldsmith, going off with Dr. Johnson, called back with an air of superiority, "I go to Mrs. Williams." "I confess," says Boswell, "I then envied him this mighty privilege of which he seemed so proud; but it was not long before I obtained the same mark of distinction." It must be admitted that Boswell did not repay the mighty privilege in a very handsome manner. Most people who have thought of Mrs.

Williams at all have, as a result of Boswell's mockery, thought of her as a figure in that ludicrous picture of the tea-party in which he describes her making tea and putting her finger down into each guest's cup of tea in turn till she felt the tea touch it, since, being blind, she had no other means of knowing if the cup was full. Boswell assures us that, in spite of this, he was so elated at being invited into the house that he "willingly drank cup after cup, as if it had been the Heliconian spring. "But," he says, "as the charm of novelty went off I grew more fastidious, and besides I discovered that she was of a peevish temper." He is honest enough, however, to admit in a footnote that his account of Mrs. Williams as a hostess is probably untrue. "I have since," he declares, "had reason to think that I was mistaken, for I have been informed by a lady who was long intimate with her and likely to be a more accurate observer of such matters, that she had acquired such a niceness of touch as to know by the feeling on the outside of the

cup, how near it was to being full." Even so, it is the untrue story that has lived.

It is safe, it must be confessed, to discount a good many of Boswell's disparaging references to his rivals for the regard of Dr. Johnson. It is incredible that any but a remarkable woman could have retained not only Johnson's pity, but his affection and esteem, as Mrs. Williams did, for something like thirty years. Boswell, seeing in Mrs. Williams only a blind and peevish old lady, was astonished at the pains that Johnson took to procure her amusement, even by taking her to the house of his friends who, according to Boswell, did not at all like it. Johnson's own account of Mrs. Williams, however, is better evidence as to her true character. When she died, a year before himself, he wrote to Dr. Burney: "My domestic companion is taken from me. She is much missed, for her acquisitions were many, and her curiosity universal, so that she partook of every conversation." And in a letter written to Bennet Langton at the same time, he called her, "a companion

to whom I have had recourse for domestic amusement for thirty years, and her variety of knowledge never was exhaustible." Instead of thinking of her as the grotesque figure at the tea-party, it is better to picture her as that thirty years' provider of good company to whom Dr. Johnson was a happy slave.

So charmingly attentive was he to her, indeed, that, before going out to the Mitre and leaving her to dine alone, he would give her "her choice of a chicken, a sweetbread or any other nice little thing, which was carefully sent to her from the tavern, and ready dressed."

It is true that Mrs. Williams and Dr. Johnson had their differences at times, as on that occasion on which she claimed that it was she, and not Johnson, who had written the poem called "On the Death of Stephen Grey the Electrician" which had appeared in her volume of miscellanies. "Sir," said she with some warmth to Boswell, "I wrote that poem before I had the honour of Dr. Johnson's acquaintance." Boswell, who did



not believe her, reported what she had said to Johnson. "It is true, sir," declared Dr. Johnson, "that she wrote it before she was acquainted with me; but she has not told you I wrote it all over again except two lines."

Hannah More described the blind old poet as engaging in her manners and her conversation as lively and entertaining. Miss Hawkins spoke of her as "a pale, shrunken old lady, dressed in scarlet," but praised her, in spite of her Welsh temper, for her "gentle kindness." Lady Knight described her collecting half-crowns in order to publish her poems, and spending them on necessities, but she also said that she "had a boundless curiosity, retentive memory, and strong judgment. She had various powers of pleasing." Bishop Percy, indignant at a description of her by Boswell, testified that, "being extremely clean and neat in her person and habits, she never gave disgust by her manner of eating," and added that "her mind was so cultivated, and her conversation so agreeable that she very much enlivened and

diverted Johnson's solitary hours." We gather from this that, while Mrs. Williams was not one of the great women of her time, there was nothing to be marvelled at in Johnson's friendship for her, and that Boswell, as often, has been so intent on giving us a faithful portrait of Johnson that he has failed to give us more than a caricature of one of Johnson's dearest friends.

Johnson's affection for Mrs. Williams may be measured by the fact that, in the ordinary affairs of life, he deferred to her to such an extent that he would not even go to the memorable dinner at which he was to meet John Wilkes without first obtaining Mrs. Williams's permission to break his engagement to dine at home with her, though this engagement was made the later of the two. It took Boswell some time to persuade Mrs. Williams to allow Johnson to go; "but," he says jubilantly, "as soon as I had announced to him Mrs. Williams's consent, he roared, 'Frank, a clean shirt,' and was very soon dressed."

One thing Johnson's marriage and his friendship with Mrs. Williams prove is that Johnson, above most men, had a strong preference for women who were more than ordinarily intelligent. We infer this, however, from a hundred sources. He shows his preference for intelligent women even in that famous sentence in which he tells Boswell, "If I had no duties, and no reference to futurity, I would spend my life in driving briskly in a post-chaise with a pretty woman," for he adds: "But she should be one who could understand me and would add something to the conversation." Johnson expressed opinions on both sides of many questions; but he was almost consistently the defender of women with brains against those who attacked them. "He maintained to me," says the dissident Boswell reporting one conversation, "contrary to the common notion, that a woman would not be the worse wife for being learned. In which," he adds, "from all that I have observed of Artemisias, I humbly differed from him." On another

occasion, according to the Rev. Doctor Maxwell, Johnson "observed that a man of sense and education should meet a suitable companion in a wife. It was a miserable thing, he said, when the conversation could only be such as whether the mutton should be boiled or roasted and probably a dispute about that."

At another time, it is true, he observed to Bennet Langton: "Supposing a wife to be of a studious or argumentative turn, it would be very troublesome. For instance, if a woman should continually dwell upon the subject of the Arian Heresy." Even the most ardent feminist, however, would agree that a continual discussion of the Arian Heresy, by a member of either sex, might end in becoming tedious. That Dr. Johnson differed from many of his contemporaries in regard to the education and intelligence of women, is shown by the fact that he offered to teach Fanny Burney Latin, when, to Mrs. Thrale's disgust, Dr. Burney refused to permit him to do so. "Dr. Burney," says Mrs. Thrale, "did not

like his daughter should learn Latin even of Johnson, because then she would have been as wise as himself, forsooth, and Latin was too masculine for Misses."

Johnson's friendship with Mrs. Thrale herself is another evidence of his appreciation of exceptionally intelligent women. Even when he was in that anti-feminist mood which occasionally appears in most men, and declared of women, "Fashion is all they think of," he added, "I don't mean Mrs. Thrale and Miss Burney, when I talk of women. They are goddesses."

The Mrs. Thrale that we find in Boswell is seldom the divine figure that Johnson worshipped. Boswell disliked Mrs. Thrale as she disliked him. He admits Mrs. Thrale's cleverness and her power of enchantment over Johnson, as when she helped to persuade him to visit Scotland; but he seldom remembers anything that puts her in an unfavourable or humiliating light that he does not mention with relish. Even in describing her appearance he shows none of the enthusiasm of Fanny Burney.

“Mrs. Thrale,” he says briefly, “was short, plump, and brisk.” Miss Burney, on the other hand, describing her during the last ten years of Johnson’s life, says: “Mrs. Thrale is a very pretty woman still. She is extremely lively and chatty, has no supercilious or pedantic airs, and is really gay and agreeable.” Mrs. Thrale, it is clear, was a good hostess, vivacious, cheerful, and ready to talk on almost any subject, literary, moral, or personal. That she could hold her own in a discussion even with Dr. Johnson, is suggested by Boswell’s already quoted statement when, criticising Johnson’s bludgeoning methods of argument, he says: “I have seen even Mrs. Thrale stunned.” To the Thrales, it is generally admitted, Johnson owed a great deal of the happiness of his later years. Some people regard his life at the Thrales’ houses, at Southwark and Streatham, where he was not merely a visitor, but almost a member of the family and a resident, as the brightest period of his existence. No doubt he enjoyed an occasional escape from

Mrs. Williams, and, just as he enjoyed talking frankly to Boswell about Mrs. Thrale, he must have been glad of an intimate friend like Mrs. Thrale, to whom he could occasionally talk frankly about Boswell. It is in her marginal notes on Boswell's "Life" that she tells how Johnson said to her one day, "I have been put so to the question by Boszy this morning that I am now panting for breath." "What sort of questions did he ask, I wonder?" said Mrs. Thrale. "Why," said Johnson, "one question was: 'Pray, sir, can you tell me why an apple is round and a pear pointed?' Would not such talk make a man hang himself?" In several pages of the "Life" Boswell represents Johnson as saying to him, "Mrs. Thrale loves you," or, "She has a high regard for you." Mrs. Thrale invariably comments on this in the margin, "Not I. I never loved him," or, "Poor Mrs. Thrale was obliged to say so, in order to keep well with Johnson." She denies utterly the truth of one of Boswell's stories, which pictured Johnson reproving

her for heartlessness. "Mrs. Thrale," says Boswell, "while supping very heartily upon larks, laid down her knife and fork and abruptly exclaimed, 'Oh, my dear Johnson, do you know what has happened? The last letters from abroad have brought us an account that our poor cousin's head was taken off by a cannon ball.' Johnson, who was shocked both at the fact and her light, unfeeling manner of mentioning it, replied, 'Madam, it would give *you* very little concern if all your relations were spitted like those larks, and dressed for supper.'" Nowadays, I fancy, most juries would give Mrs. Thrale a verdict for libel against Boswell, feeling that her reply to his story has the ring of truth. "I never," she says, "addressed him (Johnson) so familiarly in my life. I never did eat any supper and there were no larks to eat."

When two people, even the closest friends, with unusually free and eloquent tongues, talk a great deal about each other, they are bound to censure as well as to praise; and Johnson and Mrs. Thrale have left unflatter-



ing as well as flattering accounts of one another. Hence we are not surprised to find Johnson complaining to Boswell of Mrs. Thrale that "the insolence of wealth will creep out" in her conversation. Boswell agrees eagerly. "She has," he replies, "a little both of the insolence of wealth and the conceit of parts." Johnson's answer is none the less a reproof to Boswell, as well as a censure of Mrs. Thrale: "The insolence of Wealth is a wretched thing; but the conceit of parts has some foundation."

If Johnson had foreseen how Mrs. Thrale would write about him after his death, it is likely that he would have accused her of something worse than the insolence of wealth. Embittered by his behaviour to her at the time of her second marriage—to Piozzi—she saw him very often in retrospect through spiteful spectacles. We have seen how she said, in reference to Johnson's expectation of being Taylor's heir: "His fondness for Taylor, aye, and for Thrale, had a dash of interest to keep it warm." "My friend, my inmate, my dear

Dr. Johnson," she had once called him, and again: "Friend, Father, Guardian, Confidant." But in her reminiscences Johnson appears with all his faults, querulous, voracious, and indolent, rather than majestic with the virtues for which she had once esteemed him. Even her account of his behaviour when her husband had died and Johnson had been appointed one of his executors—an account, by the way, which was written some time before the Piozzi quarrel—brings him before the imagination as a ludicrous figure. Mrs. Thrale, it will be remembered, wished to sell the brewery; but she was convinced that Dr. Johnson, who, as executor, was now for the first time in his life able to sign papers involving large sums of money, would be opposed to any step that would put an end to his new game of spending hundreds of pounds with a stroke of the pen. "Johnson," she complains in her journal, ". . . is but too happy with his present employment, and the influence I have over him, added to his own solid judgment and a regard for truth, will

at last find it difficult to win him from the dirty delight of seeing his name in a new character, flaming away at the bottom of bonds and leases." This entry makes it quite clear that Mrs. Thrale's exasperation with Dr. Johnson was not entirely the result of his almost unforgivable letter to her on her marriage. Boswell, indeed, frankly expresses the opinion that her vanity had been more than "fully gratified by having the Colossus of Literature attached to her for many years." It was not till almost two years after Thrale's death that Mrs. Thrale wrote to him from Bath to announce that she was going to marry Piozzi, the Italian musician, and that Johnson replied in that passionate letter: "Madam, if I interpret your letter right, you are ignominiously married. If it is yet undone, let us once more talk together. If you have abandoned your children and your religion, God forgive your wickedness. If you have forfeited your fame and your country, may your folly do no further mischief." It is always well when reading this letter to remember that

it is the letter of an old and dying man, with passionate Protestant and Conservative prejudices, and a passionate loyalty to the memory of his friend, Thrale—the cry too of a man in constant pain at the end of a long life of pain. Many people, I fancy, remember this letter who forget the second letter which Johnson wrote in reply to Mrs. Thrale's dignified defence of her marriage. By this time he had resigned himself to what was inevitable. "I wish," he writes, "that God may grant you every blessing, that you may be happy in this world for its short continuance, and eternally happy in a better state. And, whatever I can contribute to your happiness, I am very ready to repay for that kindness which soothed twenty years of a life radically wretched." And he all but ends his letter with the words, "the tears stand in my eyes."

Mrs. Thrale scribbled a memorandum on the letter. "I wrote him a very kind and affectionate farewell." There is no need for posterity to exaggerate the final quarrel between Mrs. Thrale and Dr. Johnson.

They had both faults of temper; but the story of their friendship must be remembered as a story of a plump, brisk little woman's kindness which soothed twenty years of a life radically wretched. Mrs. Thrale, besides being an amusingly spiteful lady, remains in literary history as Johnson's goddess, the noble lady whose health he refused to drink in whisky when he and Boswell were in Scotland, because whisky was not good enough for her. And we must remember, too, that she, with her strong, silent, indifferent husband, who gave her no love and many children, also endured for many years a life radically wretched, which was soothed by the kindness of Dr. Johnson.

Of the other women whom we meet in the Johnson circle, there are none who are even the far-off rivals of Mrs. Williams and Mrs. Thrale. The most interesting of them are mentioned by Johnson in a conversation that he had with Boswell one night in the last year of his life when he was "in fine spirits at our Essex Head club." "I dined yester-

day," said Johnson, "at Mrs. Garrick's, with Mrs. Carter, Miss Hannah More, and Miss Fanny Burney. Three such women are not to be found. I know not where I could find a fourth, except Mrs. Lennox, who is superior to them all." Mrs. Lennox, author of "*The Female Quixote*," is remembered only by the scholarly to-day, and Mrs. Carter survives only as one in a constellation of learned ladies. But here again we find evidence that Johnson was attracted most of all to women of wit, intelligence, and learning. Fanny Burney was among all these women the only woman of enduring genius. In her diaries and letters she has left us one of the most vivid pictures we possess of Johnson. "He is, indeed, very ill-favoured," she wrote, after meeting him for the first time, "is tall and stout, but stoops terribly. He is almost bent double. His mouth is almost constantly opening and shutting as if he were chewing. His body is in continual agitation, see-sawing up and down. His feet are never a moment quiet, and in short his whole person is in perpetual

motion." Though a party was in progress in Dr. Burney's library at the time, she tells us, Johnson immediately went to the shelves and began to pore over the books, "almost touching the backs of them with his eyelashes as he read their titles." Then, to the disgust of the company, he began to read to himself. "We were all," says Fanny Burney, "very much provoked as we perfectly languished to hear him talk; but it seems he is the most silent creature, when not particularly called out, in the world." That is one of several references that remind us of what we are sometimes in danger of forgetting—that Dr. Johnson was not always talking.

Johnson was nearly seventy, and Fanny Burney in her twenties when they first met. He loved her, like a great-uncle, calling her (with his love of pet names) "little Burney." His affection for Fanny and his enthusiasm for "Evelina" gave her a pleasure that went to her head, and the report that he had enjoyed her novel set her dancing with delight round the mulberry tree in the

garden at Chesington. Her sister, Susan, gives a lively account in a letter of a meeting with Dr. Johnson at the Thrales', at which, on learning who she was, Johnson came up to her, put his arm round her, and said, "Now you don't expect that I shall ever love you as well as I do your sister?" and at which, after see-sawing her in his grotesque and amiable arms, he repeated merrily as he left her: "Don't expect me to love you as well as your sister," and called to her, as she was going out of the room, "Good-bye, my little love."

In one of his last letters to Dr. Burney, a little before his death, we find him still speaking affectionately of "my sweet Fanny," and Miss Burney repaid his affection in later life by imitating his style to such a point that it ruined her own.

Hannah More never won the affection of Johnson as Fanny Burney did, but she was equally excited by the prestige of being accepted as his friend. Hannah More is described in the "*Encyclopædia Britannica*" as an "English religious writer,"

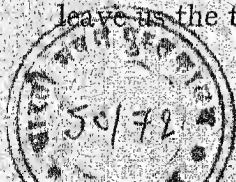


but she crows with delight over her acquaintance with Johnson like the most worldly of mortals. "I had the happiness," she tells her sister in a letter, "to carry Johnson home from Hill Street, though Mrs. Montagu publicly declared she did not think it prudent to trust us together, with such a declared affection on both sides. She said she was afraid of a Scotch elopement." And she goes on to relate how Johnson had flattered her on the way home by quoting all the best stanzas of one of her poems "with the energy, though not with the grace, of a Garrick." Hannah More, I imagine, enjoyed the company of Dr. Johnson, not so much because of what he said *to* her, as because of what he said *about* her. "Keeping bad company," she writes on one occasion, "leads to all other bad things. I have got the headache all day, by raking out so late with that young libertine Johnson," and, if she had a headache, one may guess that Johnson had not been quoting the stanzas of Hannah More. In the last year of his life we find her

writing enthusiastically to her sister to relate how he had praised her poem, "Bas-Bleu," and had said that "there was no name in literature that might not be glad to own it." Miss More had told "that parsimonious praiser," as she called him, how delighted she was by his approbation, whereupon, she declares, Johnson replied: "And so you may be, for I have given you the opinion of a man who does not rate his opinion in these things very low, I can tell you." Johnson does not appear at his best in his conversations with Hannah More. The only important dialogue between them that Boswell records is that in which Miss More expresses a wonder that the poet who had written "Paradise Lost" should write such poor sonnets, to which Johnson replies: "Milton, madam, was a genius that could cut a Colossus from a rock, but could not carve heads from cherry-stones." It is not a dialogue that reflects credit on the literary judgment of either party. It would be unfair to judge Hannah More, however, from what Boswell says of her,

since he had a good reason for disliking her because of her reproof of his drunkenness at Bishop Shipley's. Boswell never forgave anybody except Dr. Johnson for things of this sort. That is why we have to be very careful of accepting Boswell's account of any of the friends of Dr. Johnson.

Macaulay, though he despised Boswell, accepted too readily Boswell's derisive view of the women whom Johnson loved and who helped to make a life radically wretched less wretched. In the books of the Recording Angel it is probable that a more accurate biography of Johnson has been preserved in which it is made clear that Tetty, Mrs. Williams, and Mrs. Thrale played all but as delightful a part in his melancholy life as Boswell, Goldsmith, Bennet Langton, and the friends of the Club—perhaps, if we include Tetty, a more delightful part. I wish there had been a female Boswell to leave us the true and the full story of it.



22